

At the north fort,
Happy Days that
I spent with everyone!

北の此に見て

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AT THE NORTHERN FORT

– Kita no Toride Nite –

- Volume 1 -

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[Oniichanyamete | Burning Feathers]

- STORY -

Paw pads wrapped in white fur. Fluffiness around the neck. A bushy tail. A rounded figure that was the very definition of furball! ——A certain Japanese girl had been reincarnated into such a fox cub; Milfiria.

Milfiria was told to watch the house by her mother, as the mother left for the capital. However, unable to bear with the loneliness and deciding to chase her mother to the capital, Milfiria became lost in a fort protected by strong knights.



グレイル

北の砦の『鉄人副長』!
強面だが、優しい隻眼の騎士。

スノウレア

人の姿
雪の精霊。ミルフィリアの母親。
ミルフィリアを溺愛しているが
教育はスバルタ志向。

クガルグ

豹の姿

炎の精霊。強気で負けず嫌い。
ミルフィリアがお気に入り。

クロムウェル

『氷の支團長』! 普段はクールだが、
馬と小動物に対しては……。

ミルフィリア

人の姿

雪の精霊。前世は日本の
女の子。寂しがりや。

ティーナ

砦で唯一の女性騎士。
意志は強く、行動力がある。

キックス

『少年の心』を持つ騎士。
良くも悪くも物怖じしない。



Chapter 1

The Foxy Me

Back in my previous life when I was still living as a Japanese person, I had once heard a certain urban legend.

A newly moved parent and child were going shopping. But because they weren't familiar with the area, the mother stopped, lost.

But at that moment, the one that told her the way to the shops was her child who wasn't even 5 yet.

"We need to cross the traffic lights over there, and then make a right. I know this street."

Of course, this was the first time he had come to this place. There was no way he could have known it.

But the reality was that the shop was just where the child had said.

Though surprised, the mother followed his directions, and as they were crossing the traffic lights, the boy muttered in a low, mature voice,

"I... was killed by a car here in my past life."

Gyahh!! I thought, when I first heard that scary story.

But right now I'm not in the position to be afraid. As to why, that's because right now I'm in the same situation as the child in that story.

—In other words, I've been born again with my past life's memories still in my head.

But I'm not a human in this life.

I was staring at a padded hand covered in white fur. No, a padded paw, rather.

Peering into the frozen spring in front of me, I saw myself reflected on the ice.

“Kyun...”

I sighed. No matter how many times I looked at myself, I wasn’t a human.

Right now I was a fox pup, with silver-white fur like the colour of snow. Strictly speaking, I was rounder than the fox pups I knew of, there was fluffy fur around my neck like a muffler, and even my tail was probably 9 tenths fur.

If I curled myself up, I would probably look like a ball of fluff lying around.

But the reason I looked this silly might have been because I was living in a snowy mountain. The fur was like a natural coat. Even though I was in the middle of snowy winds on a sub-zero mountain, I was completely fine after all.

And the other reason that I was good with the cold was because I wasn’t just a normal fox.

According to my mother in this life, our species is categorised as a type of [spirit]. In other words, far from being a human, I’m not even an animal.

Apparently we’re snow spirits that take the form of foxes, but I don’t know much more than that.

Mother has no idea that I have memories of my past life, so she probably didn’t tell me anything complicated because she thought of me as a child.

Right now I’m still young, and it’s unfortunate to say that just like human babies, I can’t speak.

No matter how hard I try, the best I can manage is “kyun kyun”.

“Kyun...”

I let out my second sigh for today.

Even my sighs don’t sound like “hahh” and instead go “kyun”. It’s kind of stupid sounding, so I don’t like it. There’s no feeling of being depressed to it.

And at that moment, I saw a small fish in the spring.

My ears pricked up, and I stepped down onto the thick, frozen surface of the water. My squishy paws were too weak, so I knew that I couldn't break the ice to catch the fish.

But no matter what, I couldn't help myself.

In my past life, I died at the young age of 18, and it's been about a year since I was reborn here. In other words, if you count things simply then I should be mentally close to 20 already, but occasionally I get drawn into behaviours that match my body's age, and animal nature.

When I see things that move, I feel like chasing them, and I can't stop myself.

It's embarrassing to say, but sometimes I even chase my tail without realising it, and run about in circles.

I chased after the small fish under the ice, and ran around with a pitter patter. The ice was slippery, and I fell about once every five steps. Because my childish head was too big, I found to hard enough to run steadily on solid ground, to say nothing of the ice.

As though sneering at me, the small fish continued to quickly swim here and there.

Damnit, damnitt! I want that fish so bad.

Becoming stubborn, I began scratching at the ice when,

"What on earth are you doing in a place like this, Milfiria?"

from behind me, I heard a woman's dignified and clear voice. Milfiria is my name in this life.

Forgetting about the fish for an instant and turning around, I found a beautiful fox of about a metre tall, staring my way with its light blue eyes.

It was Mother.

"Kyun!"

Letting out a high-pitched cry, I ran up to Mother, and nuzzled my head against her forelegs.

"The sun is about to set. It is time to return home, my beloved child."

Unlike me, Mother can speak. I wonder if I'll be able to speak too once I grow up.

Gently biting the scruff of my neck, Mother lifted me up. She walked atop the hardened snow towards our home.

Our home is a cave near the peak of this snowy mountain. The wind doesn't blow in, so there's no worry of getting buried in while we sleep either.

Mother continued into the back of the cave and put me down, before closing her eyes as though concentrating.

And in the next moment, the figure of the large white had fox disappeared, and in its place was a peerless beauty with clear, white skin.

She had long and glossy silver-white hair, and around her neck was a white fur muffler. That isn't fox fur, right?

Wearing an outfit like a Japanese kimono with a somewhat Chinese essence to it, she gave the impression of being a somewhat flashy yukionna.

The breast of the kimono was opened a great deal, and a splendid ravine was visible. Although she's my mother, I have to say that it's quite an amazing chest she has. By all means let it be hereditary.

Indeed. It was Mother in her humanoid form. Although she spends a lot of time in her fox form while in front of me, there are [certain times] when she always becomes humanoid.

Those [certain times] are when Mother goes down to town.

"Milfuria, I need a few words with you."



In the same beautiful voice as her fox form, Mother called out to me.

Chapter 2

Holding The Fort, Commence

“I must have you watch our home by yourself for a while.”

In a pleasant, song-like voice, Mother spoke to me.

Hearing that I would have to watch the house, my ears and bushy tail drooped. This body is too honest.

“The truth is I have been summoned by the King, you see... I spoke to you of the King earlier, did I not? He governs this Kingdom of Aridora, and is the most high ranked amongst the humans.”

I had been taught before that this country was apparently a monarchy. And that Mother was [cooperating] with that King.

Spirits are fundamentally fond of the humans that live on the same land as them, and sometimes help them.

For example in wars and stuff, the spirits that live in Aridora will help the Aridoran humans.

They hate when strangers—humans from other countries, noisily intrude on their land, after all.

Of course, that doesn't mean that all spirits will actively cooperate with the humans. There are some that think that humans should solve their own problems, but on that point, Mother is cooperative.

“Lately there has been trouble brewing with the neighbouring nation, you see. Until matters settle down, I shall be by their side. That one is quite likeable as far as humans go. I have been watching him since he was a child, after all, and it would be a pity to let him die.”

Mother continued.

"It pains me to leave you alone when you have not even been born for a year yet, although I am also hesitant to bring you with me to the Capital. It is a maelstrom of human ambition and desire after all. There are also those who would seek to make the power of a spirit their own. It is a poisonous place to one pure as you."

That can't be... I'm not pure at all, so take me with you.

I'm stained with desire too.

"I shall return in one month, so endure until then."

Hearing Mother's smooth words, I doubted my ears. To think that I would have to stay here by myself for a whole month.

Mother had gone to the King before, but she would always come back after a day at most.

Kyun kyun, I cried as I clung to Mother's leg. Leaving an infant alone for a whole month... That's neglect. Abuse!!

Mother spoke to me with a troubled expression.

"I had thought that you had some oddly mature parts to you, but you truly are still a child. But as one who will inherit the name Snowlea, you must live more strongly. Live without relying on your mother for this month, and fix that cowardly nature of yours."

Snowlea is apparently the name that each generation of our clan inherits, and is Mother's current name.

Mother is usually gentle, but when it comes to upbringing, she believes in being Spartan, and rather than having me brought up girly and gentle, she apparently prefers for me to grow up strong and tough.

There was even one time when she told me "Climb up from the bottom." before dropping me off a cliff. If I wasn't a spirit, I would've died.

"Well then, try your best, Milfiria, my beloved child."

Mother gave my fluffy head a kiss, before a small blizzard seemed to rise from the ground and wrapped her up. When it was gone, so was her figure.

She left for the castle with the King.

Wahhhh, Mother you jerrkkk!

It's impossible for an infant like me to live by myself for a monthhh!

I gave a resentful cry, but thinking about it calmly, it actually doesn't seem that difficult.

As a spirit, I don't feel hungry, and I can survive even without eating anything. That's why I don't particularly have to hunt.

The other problem is outside invaders, but it's never seemed to be a problem before. Reason being that it's too cold on the summit where we live, and there are almost no animals here.

When it comes to large carnivores, occasionally a non-hibernating bear called a snow bear will come along, but we're spirits, and they've never attacked us before. Animals are sharp, so they apparently know by instinct that we're a different dimension of being to them.

In other words, I have no enemy animals on this snowy mountain, and even if I fail at hunting, there's no worry of starving to death.

If it's just a month then even the young me can survive without problems.

Geeez, isn't that easy then?

It was only for a few months, but I lived by myself in my past life as well, so it's just the same thing. Easy peasy.

Or so I was thinking and getting cocky, but I had totally forgotten that when I moved out by myself for university, I fell homesick on the very first day.



Suddenly waking up in the middle of the night and realising that Mother wasn't by my side, I somehow felt terribly forlorn. The cave that we were using as our den was quiet, and the silence hurt my ears. Snow was falling heavily outside.

I closed my eyes to sleep again, but my restless feelings kept me awake. It's lonely

living by myself in a mountain like this.

“Kyuuun!”

Getting up and leaving the cave, I cried into the air. It was the cry that I used for calling Mother, and was higher pitched than normal. There was a trick to putting lots of grief into it as well.

Normally when I get lost in the mountains and I cry out with this voice, Mother always comes to pick me up.

“Kyuuun! Kyuuun!”

But this time, no matter how many times I continued to cry, Mother wouldn’t come to greet me.

Even the time when I had been tossed off a cliff for training, when I cried like this, Mother had said “Honestly, what a hopeless child.” and picked me up.

Being by myself for a whole month really is too muchh!

There aren’t any attackers, and I won’t starve either, but I’ll die from being lonely.

But right now Mother is in the capital, and no matter how loudly I cry, she won’t come back.

In that case—

I’ve decided.

I’ll follow Mother to the capital.

If I make it to the King’s castle by my own strength, Mother will be surprised and praise me for my toughness.

Now that I’ve made up my mind, it’s time to head down the mountain.

With my tail up high, I left the cave behind, powered by vigour alone.

Chapter 3

Children Are The Enemy

I woke up with a start to find that it was morning.

It was great that I set out on a journey to Mother's side, but I was still too young in this life. My body wasn't moving the way I wanted and every few hundred metres of plodding along, I would tire out and fall asleep.

Children will sometimes play like crazy and then suddenly fall asleep like their batteries run flat, but my situation was exactly like that. Although, as an adult on the inside, I'm a little embarrassed about this.

I shook my body to fling off the snow that built up while I was sleeping. It had been layered on quite heavily.

And then renewing my determination, I decided that today for sure I would reach the bottom of the mountain.

Although having said that, the distance I took with each step was terrifyingly short.

Even when I ran until I panted *wafuwafu*, my progress was trifling. Can I cry already?

After all, the scenery has been completely white the whole time, and far from reaching the Capital, I won't even leave this mountain at this rate. I have to run more frantically.

Wafu, wafu

Wafu, wafu

This is me being frantic you know. I'm trying my best you know.

But because of my appearance, a happy-go-lucky sound effect accompanies me no matter what I do.

Wafu, wafu...



It's been a year since I was born. Have I ever more keenly realised the shortness of my limbs?

Fifteen days.

The time it took me to descend the mountain and leave the surrounding forest was a total of fifteen days.

...That's half of Mother's trip already.

Right now I had left the forest and was walking along a small path that led to a human town. My spirits were a lot lower than when I had triumphantly left home.

The only good thing was that my muscles weren't hurting at all, despite all the running I did. I did get fatigued each day, but it would reset with a night's sleep.

Even right this moment, I was only tired from the running I did today. Is this resilience because I'm a spirit?

According to Mother, the mountain we're living on is at in northernmost part of the country, while the Capital is in the middle. Even in winter, there isn't much snow there, and it's a comparatively warmer place.

But right now I'm still in the middle of a snow field. If I've only made it this far after fifteen days, maybe it's impossible to reach the Capital.

Although I was closer and closer to giving up, I continued to walk. And while I did, I finally reached a fork in the road.

To the right spread a human town. It was my first time coming down the mountain to a human settlement, so I was watching the town with great interest.

The place gave the atmosphere of somewhere in ancient Europe, and the townscape was built in a Western style. I heard that the town was large, and there were lots of people too, but it was cold here and there was lots of snow, so it gave me a calm and quiet impression. Everybody was probably holed up in their warm homes.

After having a look over the town, this time I turned to the left.

There was a massive building of some sort, but because it was boring and undecorated, I suspected it was a military facility like a base, stronghold or fort of some kind.

Does this country have a military too? I wonder if they're knights like in fantasy stories.

I stood still at the forked road, unsure of where to do.

Two young children were approaching from town, and when they caught sight of me, they started running this way.

“Wanwa!”

Just who is ‘Wanwa’. So rude.

“Wanwa, Wanwa”

Just as I had registered the girl and boy happily running towards me, in the next moment, *gyuuu*, they hugged me without hesitation.

Ugwohh... I’m begging you, please be a little gentler. Various things that aren’t supposed to are going to come out of my mouth.

“Wanwaa!”

I get it. Wanwa gets it.

With their Western faces, the two children were as cute as angels, but they were quite strong. They tugged at my fur, and tugged at my tail, and I couldn’t help but let out pathetic *kyunkyun* noises.

I’ve even lost to children?

But it isn’t as though these children are hurting me on purpose, so I couldn’t even bite at them to resist.

Owowowowow.

While grimacing in the midst of this battlefield—it was easily a battlefield for *me*—

just as I was wondering how to escape, a saviour appeared with wonderful timing.

“Alt, Mine, where are youuu?”

The female voice came from the direction of the town, probably belonging to their mother. The children immediately turned that way and relaxed their hands.

Unwilling to let this chance go, I immediately ran away. In the exact opposite direction of the children.

Like a white bullet, I sped across the snow.

...I'm sorry for lying. The truth is I just toddled and tumbled away.

After hiding in a bush, I turned around to have a look and found that the mother had finally arrived as the children were looking at me in disappointment.

“Time to go home.”

With her children in hand, the mother brought them back to their warm house.

Aahh, how nice. I miss Mother as well.

Who would guess that this spoiled fox was actually almost an adult in her previous life. I think my mind really is being pulled down to my body's age after all.

I was a little bit more together in my past life... at least, I should have been...

Now then, it's about time to leave the bush.

Stepping out, I began to think.

Those children are still in town, so I don't really want to go there. From now on I need to watch out for any children that sprint my way with a smile. Children are cute, innocent, and terrifying beings.

Since I no longer had the option of going into town, I began heading down the left path.

I walked as far as the menacing fortress, and looked for an entrance I could use to enter. This place is probably a division of this country's knights or military or

whatever. I'm sure there's going to be heaps of people here who know the way to the Capital.

Although the problem is, given that all I can do is make pathetic "kyunkyun" noises, I don't know how exactly I'm supposed to ask them.

But well, everything in life begins with a try.

For now I was going to head inside, so I slipped through a crack in the surrounding fence.

Chapter 4

Trespassing

Although my head got stuck in the fence, I somehow managed to squeeze through and I made my way inside. The place was large, and if I walked about at random I would probably get lost.

I sniffed the air, and looked for a place that smelt of people. Given that it was a military base, the place was filled with the scent of males. It was very different from mother, who smells sweet and fragrant.

The paths that people used had the snow shovelled off them, so I just followed them. Eventually, it opened up into a clearing of sorts. Kind of like a snowy sports ground.

I found dozens of people gathered in one of the corners, so for the moment I hid in the shadow of a building.

I then once again slowly poked my head out. They were apparently doing sword training, and even though it was so cold, they weren't wearing coats or anything. There were probably other people working or doing other training, so maybe these people were only a fraction of all the people living in this base. After all, compared to the size of the building, there were too few people here.

Everyone had a sword in one hand, but the only people swinging their swords were the two in the middle.

"You're being too timid. You think you're fit to be a knight with guts like those?"

A strict-looking superior was scolding them harshly, as he watched the two match swords.

Since there weren't any 'knights' in my old life, I got just a little excited.

The superior man had short grey hair, and a fearless face. He was tall and muscular, and had a well-maintained figure, like a boxer. He probably like 3% body fat.

Not only that, but what stood out most was the big scar on his face. It ran down the left side of it, from the forehead to his chin. It was like a sword cut right down, and because of that his left eye was scarred.

While I was staring at the one-eyed knight from the shadows, without any warning, he suddenly turned my way.

We were pretty far apart, so I never thought he'd notice me, but the moment our eyes met my fur stood right up and I jumped back into the shadows.

His right eye shot right through me. Why did he notice me. I didn't move or make a sound at all.

It can't be that he noticed my gaze? Was it because I boldly stared at him?

The man showed no signs of heading my way. I could still hear the metal swords clashing, and the training seemed to continue without incident.

After getting my breathing under control and calming down a little, I stuck my head out to have just one more lo—

—ok, oh he's still looking this way.



HE'S STILL LOOKING THIS WAY!

This time our gazes definitely met, so I turned my body around and ran right out of there. As my feet hit the ground, soft snow flew up. Moving my short legs, I ran for a few dozen metres before slowing down to take a corner. It's fine, nobody is chasing me.

Around the time that I sighed in relief, I calmed down and realised that there was no reason I actually had to run.

To begin with, I came in here because I wanted to ask somebody for the way to the Capital. I haven't figured out how to ask when I can't talk though.

Anyway, I really need to make contact with the humans or else nothing will ever begin. What am I going to do if I run away just from eye-contact. I was a human too, in my past life. I know full well that humans aren't just walking masses of cruelty. There's no reason to run.

Alright!

I took a step forward after gathering my courage.

But when I saw a few knights walking from afar, I immediately curled my tail and hid in the shadow of a staircase.

Mother...

Like you said, I might be a bit cowardly.

Actually, now that I'm this small, a human is actually shockingly big to me. Seeing them up close is pretty scary.

Not only that, but I don't even know how the humans of this world would react to me. What if they caught me and killed me, and then skinned me for my fur.

Since I look just like a small fox cub, what if they didn't realise I was a snow spirit. And if they did notice, what would they do? I don't think anybody would attack me, but...

Anyway, the point is that it's scary not knowing what they'd do to me. Would it be safer for me if I acted like a normal fox, or would it be safer for me if I really brought out my

“snow spirit-ness”? Umumu...

I was thinking seriously about the issue, but a wave of sleepiness started to wash over me. I spent all day moving about after all, and I had a really rough time with those horrid children too.

It's almost evening now, and even though there's some time left until sunset, I should probably start sleeping now.

I gave a large yawn—since I'm in this kind of body, I couldn't do a pretty little yawn with my hand over my mouth. It was a bold yawn with my teeth completely bare—and then I began sneaking around looking for a place to spend the night.

I walked about the base, careful not to bump into any humans, and in the end I decided on the back of what seemed like a barracks or dormitory for the knights. It wasn't all that spacey, but there were some short trees here and there. I bet once spring comes, the lawn will pop up from beneath the melted snow.

It didn't seem like people would often come here, and there weren't any markings by stray cats or anything either.

There was a shed in the raw corner of this back courtyard, and it seemed almost forgotten, so I decided that I was going to sleep there. Maybe the door had been broken, because I couldn't see one anywhere.

Inside, it was small enough that maybe even an adult couldn't lay down here. The only things inside were snow shovels. Since there was no door, a little snow had blown inside, but it was no issue to a living fluffball like myself.

I entered the shed and then curled up into a ball.

If I had to name one worry, I suppose it would be that the whole shed was visible from a dorm window. The opening to the shed was completely in-line with it.

But once the sun sets, the place will be blanketed in darkness. It'll be pitch black in here too, and even if somebody looked out the window, maybe they wouldn't see me?

With my eyes closed, I thought about it casually with one foot into the land of nod... ZZZ...

Chapter 5

The One-Eyed Knight

-**GATA GATA-**

My ears twitched at the sound of a window opening. But I was still sleepy, so my eyes wouldn't open.

In my half-awake mind, I dimly thought "The windows in my old life opened a lot more smoothly huh."

I wonder if the frame is wooden.

-**GATA GATATA-**

Maybe you guys should oil it a little.

So noisy.

I opened one eye.

There was a person by the window, opposite the shed I was sleeping in. The window was wide open, and he was looking through it.

—Staring. Right this way.

"...!?"

I immediately woke up. Bolting to my feet, I stared right back at him. I could tell that my hairs were standing on end.

It's that one-eyed knight.

...Could that be your room?

There was a lamp in the room, but the light leaked through the window and illuminated

my body.

OH MY GAH.

Who was it! Who was it that said that I'd be hidden once the sun set! He can probably see every hair!

Maybe he had gotten back and was already relaxing, because he was wearing a lot less now. Umu, he really does have great muscles.

As I stood in the shed, and he in his room, the two of us watched each other without moving.

The atmosphere is getting kind of tense. I could feel a nervous sweat forming at my paw pads.

At that moment, the one-eyed knight suddenly placed his foot against the window frame, and then **-don-** landed lightly on the ground.

His one good eye pierced through me, and his boots began to crush the snow as he made his way to me.

With my escape route blocked, I fell into a huge panic, and then because he was closing the distance, I panicked even more. There was only a metre between us now.

The light from his room was illuminating him, but because it was a backlight, his face was obscured and it made him all the more terrifying. It's a bit mean to say this, but he had a scary face to begin with.

After a moment of silence, his arm stretched towards me, and I screamed "GYAHH!" in my mind. In reflex, I kicked off the ground and moved back.

But this shed is tiny. When I jumped back, I crashed into all the shovels.

And then the loud sounds of the crash surprised me, and sent me further into a panic. The shovels fell to the ground noisily, and I became so confused I had no idea what was up or down anymore. I jumped and flailed about, and even stepped on my own tail and tripped.

"Oi."

His palm reached out for me again. It was about the size of my face, and there were small scars and calluses from practising the sword. This man is probably really strong.

On the other hand, I'm powerless. Mother can use blizzards to freeze her enemies, but that kind of thing is still impossible for me.

What am I going to do if One-Eyed Knight wants to kill me? What if those hands strangle my neck?

It's the end for me if he catches me.

When I realised this, the battle instincts I didn't know I had surged out from within.

You think I'll let you catch me?

Get the enemy before he gets you first!

My fangs were bared before I realised, and I bit into his hand. A low growl escaped my throat.

I thought he would retaliate, but he stayed still down to his expression.

Since he wasn't reacting at all, I gradually grew calmer. I stopped growling, and then let go of him in a fluster. I could faintly taste blood on my tongue.

When he slowly stood up, I froze with a start, but he just said,

"Sorry for scaring you,"

and then left the shed.

With my escape route open again, I quickly ran outside, and then took a certain distance from him. I stared his way, all four legs poised to run at any time.

My heart was hammering away, but I was a little calmer now.

What do I do? I bit his hand. I didn't think I had such a feral part to me.

Apparently it was a finger on his right hand that I had bitten, because it was bleeding just a little.

My canines are small and thin. Not only that, but my jaws don't have much biting power, so as far as I could tell his injuries were light.

But it's quite a shock to me that I could hurt somebody like this. I could feel my ears and tail drooping.

"Kyunkyun," I cried, as I tried asking if it hurt.

"Somebody's gotten meek all of a sudden."

One-Eyed Knight smiled lazily at my attitude change. Paying no heed to his injuries, he came my way.

"Kyan!"

Awawa, don't come over here!

I ran away again. And after taking enough distance that I could feel safe again, I stopped and turned around.

Each time he frowned and came my way again, I would run away the same distance. We repeated this again and again, and maintained the same distance.

"What the hell..." muttered One-Eyed Knight.

I don't get it either, okay. I'm sorry about biting, and I want to apologise about that, but when you close in on me, it's still scary and I get nervous.

The human in me judged that One-Eyed Knight wasn't a bad person.

He has a scary face, but he doesn't mean me any harm. Maybe he means to shelter me.

But the fox in me kept thinking "You can't trust him so easily," and stayed on guard.

Until I'm absolutely sure that he's safe, the fox me is going to keep a distance.

While I was watching him, he turned back and headed back to his room.

I sat down on the spot and watched him leave.

Did he maybe lose interest in me? I'm not sure if I'm relieved, or lonely about that.

He returned through his window, and didn't show his face for a while. Maybe he was treating the bite wound.

I'm a spirit, so I don't think I'll give him diseases, but he probably thinks I'm an animal, and I guess he would need to be careful to sterilise it.

If I could talk, then I could apologise...

Fifteen minutes passed without incident, so I decided it was time to get closer to his room. The window was still wide open.

When I looked inside from the shade of a tree, I found that One-Eyed Knight had some kind of plate in hand, and once again showed up by the window.

“?”

I stretched my neck because I was curious about the plate.

When I did, I found that I could smell something appetising. There were a few small balls of meat on the plate. Meatball with sauce, it seemed.

My stomach growled. Even though I shouldn't need any food as a spirit, my human self knew that the food would probably be yummy. When I imagined how it would taste, my tummy suddenly felt empty.

Sometimes I see Mother drinking alcohol, so I should be okay eating human food, right?

Lured by the smell, I tottered over to the window.

Aah, it smells good.

It smells really good.

I looked at the meatballs in One-Eyed Knight's hand, and gulped.

Mother tells me “Spirits don't need food,” but sometimes she brings me mice as “snacks”.

But I still have my thoughts as a human. How could I look at a mouse with its eyes rolled back and think “Wow, looks delish!”? I always shake my head and let Mother have them.

Since we live on a mountain, Mother always brings me dying animals as “snacks”. Thanks to that, I guess I misunderstood and thought that I had no appetite. I might not have ever seen human food since coming to this world.

But now, with this meal in front of me, the longing for it was unbearable. Drool was running from my half-open mouth.

I forgot about my fear for him, and ran over with my tail wagging.

But the window was too high for me, and I couldn’t reach the food. Aah, damnit. It’s so close. I placed my front legs against the wall, and let out heartbroken cries as I stood on my two hind legs.

Seeing this, One-Eyed Knight went back inside, and brought three wooden boxes from somewhere. I took a few steps back in wonder.

Leaning out of the window, he dropped them onto the ground. Using the three boxes, he created a crude staircase for me.

And on the second step, closer to the window, he placed the plate down for me.

In joy, I jumped onto the first step. But just as I was about to take a bite, *Wait a minute*, I thought, and looked right up.

Standing at the window was One-Eyed Knight, watching me from up close.

He probably didn’t mean to, but I felt really pressured by his grey eye and hair. Maybe because his eyes were sharp, it felt like he was glaring at me.

Meeting his gaze from so close, I felt my body freeze. As I felt regret at the smell of the food, I went down the stairs and took a distance.

I want to eat. But being near him is scary.

I walked restlessly around the boxes. Unfortunately my nose is really good, so I could perfectly smell the fragrant meat and sauce.

I'd approach the food, but his eyes made me run, I'd approach the food, but his eyes made me run.

As I repeated this over and over, he gave a troubled smile and said,

"Got it. I'll leave, so take your time."

With that, he really disappeared into the room, so after watching carefully for about a minute, I quickly leapt onto the box. While feeling moved about this taste from my old life, I gobbled down the food. Yummmmyyy.

The 5 bite-sized meatballs quickly disappeared, but it was more than enough to fill my little stomach.

After licking the sauce off the plate, careful not to step on the plate, I placed my forelegs against the window and peeked in.

In the plain, undecorated room, One-Eyed Knight was sitting on his bed and polishing a sword. I was still worried about the bite I left, so I stared carefully at his hands.

It looked like he had washed it, and all that was left were two red dots—marks from my teeth. It was just a small injury, but I was worried, and wondered if he wasn't going to use a band-aid or something.

I called out in a small voice, and let him know that I was done.

"Did you eat it all?"

He put down his sword and stood up. And then when I jumped down from the box, he stretched out his arm through the window.

"You licked it clean, huh."

Not a single stain could be seen on it.

"Where are you sleeping today?"

His tone was soft and gentle. It was comforting, listening to his low voice. Was he worried about me?

I went into the shed with the fallen shovels to answer him. There's probably nowhere better.

"I'll get rid of the shovels for you tomorrow."

Seeing me find a spot between the shovels, he laughed.

"Cya."

Closing the window, the quiet night returned. But if I listened carefully, I could hear the sounds of floorboards groaning, and doors opening and shutting.

Even though it's scary when he's too close, for some reason it makes me feel safe to know that he's close-by.

Hearing the other knights inside the dorm helped the loneliness of having Mother gone. On the mountain top, not even an animal could be seen, I felt like I was the only one in the world, and it was terribly lonely.

Because I have memories of my old life, I'm different to both a proper animal and a proper spirit.

I guess I really feel most relaxed around humans.

Resting my shin on a fallen shovel, I fell into a deep dream.

Chapter 6

Frolicking

The next morning. I woke up as the surroundings got brighter.

While I was stretching outside the hut, with the **-gatagata-** sound of a window opening,

“You’re up early.”

The one-eyed knight poked his head out. He was still in his pyjamas. Maybe he still has low blood pressure in the morning. He still felt drowsy.

He just woke up, yet his eyes or his face didn’t get puffy. How enviable.

“Wait a little longer for breakfast.”

Saying that, the one-eyed knight went inside.

I climbed up on the wooden boxes to peek inside since I was curious, but I was greeted by the scene of the one-eyed knight changing his clothes, so I hurriedly turned away.

My face still in its hot state, I went back down to the ground. To calm my heart, I continuously dug up the piled up snow. **-zubabababa-**... Oh my, this is quite fun.

The one-eyed knight brought my breakfast when I reached the mud as I dug the snow, that my front paws were all muddy.

“Don’t dig too much. You’ll fall in,”

he said while placing a plate of food on the wooden box.

How rude. Even I don’t fall into my own holes.

Then I fell in.

I was too focused on the food that my front paw fell in the hole and I tripped over.

"That's why I told you," laughed the one-eyed knight.

Embarrassing. My face heated up.

"Eat well,"

he said with a smile on his face and then disappeared inside, closing the window behind him.

After I got myself out of the hole and climbed the boxes, I peeked inside, where I found the one-eyed knight just about to exit the room.

Having noticed me peeking inside, he lightly waved his hand, saying, "see you." He's probably going to go training.

After seeing him go out, I started eating.

It was a soup with carrots and potatoes, along with bite-sized pieces of bread. This feels like cat food. I'm glad he didn't give me raw meat from overly considerate.

Hafuhafu, I breathed as I brought the food to my mouth with my tongue. The bread was soaked so it looked unappetising, but it still tasted good.

Now that my belly was full, I started thinking about the future. I really want to go to where Mother is, but I still don't know the way to the Capital. So instead, maybe I should stay here for a bit.

Here in this base, there are no innocent but scary children, nor are there any hunters aiming for my fur. There are only knights here. I think it's a rather safe place.

I can't imagine a knight bullying a small animal. Even the one-eyed knight was kind.

The way from here to the Capital is endlessly long for my small legs. There might be danger on the way too.

Then, it might be best to wait for Mother here without moving. There are many people here, so I won't get lonely like when I was up in the mountains, and plus I can have tasty food.

...That could actually be the number one reason.

After using my hind leg to scratch my head with a **-kakakat-**, I walked around the hole I dug. I will be here for a while, I should take some time to look around.

Moving around stealthily as to not encounter any humans, I arrived at the sports ground that I visited yesterday. To be accurate, a training ground maybe? The one-eyed knight had his subordinates here.

However, today, there wasn't anyone here, and the snowy ground was silent.

Maybe they ran, since there were many footprints drawing a circle around the field. There were footprints where the knights trained yesterday, but as for the rest it's all fresh. No one stepped on them.

Fidget fidget...

Fidget fidget...

My big eyes are probably shining brightly. I can't stop this pounding in my chest.

Who could win against that white temptation.

It's impossible for me, impossible!

After checking that there wasn't anyone around, I ran out while my tail wagged - **bunbun-**. I am going to make footprints on this untouched snow.

About twenty centimetres high. It's soft and clean, it's the best. *Hwafuhafu*. I ran around the field, jumped about, rolled about, buried my face in the snow and dug holes.

How fun!

"Are you a kid?" you might laugh but I'm still fine if you say that. Because I *am* a kid.

I wouldn't have the courage to do this in my previous life's appearance, but now that I am a fox cub I have no shame in doing this.

Panting about, I rolled around freely on the snow while attaching snow on my fur, my pride and joy.

After I played around until I was satisfied, I went back to walking about the base. It was also fun moving around stealthily to not get spotted by humans. It felt as if I was playing hide-and-seek.

I stalked a knight that was moving, and sneaked up to the sentry knight as much as possible.

I lose if I get spotted, but so far I haven't been discovered.

Usually, I do have my consciousness as a human, but once my play switch is on, I can't stop myself. My instincts demand fun things.

Though I am dumbfounded at how childish it is, I still rushed in when I saw fresh snow, sadly.

Leaving paw footprints on the snow, stalking a knight, climbing a small mountain of snow that was created from cleaning the snow, sniffing the horse in the stable, going into some place like a toilet and almost falling in.

I played around for the whole day. When I realised it, the sun was already setting.

When I returned thinking that I needed food, the one-eyed knight was waiting in front of the shed. It appeared that he moved all the shovels away someplace else and laid out blankets.

After placing dinner—some sort of meat, roasted simply—on top of the wooden box, he looked at me and said this teasingly,

"Did you have fun running on the snow? You looked quite excited."

...You were watching?

For some reason, I felt really embarrassed. Just where did he see that from. Was it when I was on the training grounds.

While slightly shaking my tail as if to hide my embarrassment, I pledged to be careful from here on.

Chapter 7

The Vice-Captain Feeds The Fox

The group in charge of the Northern Fort was the Ninth Branch of the Kingdom's Knightly Order.

The Branch Vice-Captain — the second-in-command Grail recently found something joyful.

Though he was someone who was both respected and feared by his subordinates, at the moment his sharp gaze was dulled as he stared at a certain creature.

It was a white fox that had settled in the shed next to the quarters four days ago.

Though he was not certain since he did not investigate, Grail believed that it was a she. Lovely and timid, it felt like a 'girl'.

Though she was always up earlier than Grail, today she was sleeping in. She was wrapped up in blankets in the old shed, sleeping peacefully.

Though she seemed too small to be on her own, the mother fox was nowhere to be seen. Grail thought that she wandered over here after the mother abandoned the youngling. Perhaps she couldn't even get food on her own, since he had never seen her hunt.

After glancing at the sleeping fox cub for a while, he left the window.

Having finished changing his clothes, he headed to the dining hall in the base. It was reserved for the knights working in the fort.

Because it was still early, there weren't many people here. Still, it quickly became crowded over the next thirty minutes.

"Good morning, Vice-Captain."

"Aah, 'morning."

After exchanging greetings with his subordinates, who also woke up early, he got his breakfast on a tray.

He sat down alone and ate silently. As he returned the tray, he spoke out to the Chef, a man who had nice physique and had worked here for a long time now.

“Can I get the morning portion?”

“Oh, Mr Vice-Captain. I made sure to set some aside.”

He knew of the existence of the fox cub from Grail’s stories. And he was the one preparing food.

Since it was just making the knight’s food less salty, it wasn’t a hard task. Today’s breakfast for the fox was a soup of turnips, cabbage and bacon with bread. Soup was common for breakfast meals.

They thought that foxes enjoyed meat, but this fox cub didn’t really seem to. Vegetables, bread, fruit, she ate them all happily.

In contrast, she seemed to be bad with raw meat. While she gladly ate meatballs and roasted meat, when she was given fresh, blood-dripping deer meat she looked disgusted and took a few steps away.

Perhaps she thought that raw meat was not food because she only had her mother’s milk so far?

“It’s the first time giving her turnips. I hope she likes them.”

The Chef said as he held out a dish with food in it. He didn’t care too much for the knights since they ate whatever was given, but he took more care for the fox cub. She didn’t seem to like green peas, since she left them yesterday.

“It doesn’t have a strong flavour, so it should be alright. Thank you as always.”

When Grail said that,

“You’re welcome. I’m also happy when she eats it all up,”

laughed the Chef. Though he hadn’t gotten to meet her yet, he was excited like a

grandfather who just got a grandchild. It seemed that he was going to make jerky for the fox cub again today.

While smiling at the energetic Chef, Grail took breakfast for the baby fox and headed back to his room.

When he opened his room's door, the baby fox was by the window.

She woke up while Grail was at the dining hall.

She was stretching out her neck on the wooden box, but from where Grail was he could only see her front paws, her large ears and the top bit of her head.

Maybe she was hungry. Seeing her sniff about and trying to peek into the room was lovely, and was rather destructive towards his stern demeanour.

Though Grail was usually expressionless, even he ended up smiling at the sight.

“Here, food.”

When Grail approached and opened the window, the fox cub quickly darted off the box and distanced herself. Grail thought that she might have gotten used to it by now, but she still looked afraid of coming near. Even when he placed the dish on the second step, she just hung about and avoided coming closer.

However, when Grail closed the window, she nimbly climbed up the box and started eating.

At first, she became tense just from Grail watching, but now as long as there was the window in between she seemed to be fine.

While lifting up her head sometimes to see Grail, she gobbled with a *haguhagu*.

“See you in the evening.”

Grail said to the cub while tapping the closed window with his fingers. Everything she did was interesting, and never ceased to amuse, but unfortunately it was time for training. He left the room and headed to the training grounds.

Being the vice-captain, Grail had to work with documents a lot. He also supervised his

subordinates, so no longer did he train until he couldn't move.

Thus, before work began, he would always train alone in the morning. He did the basic routines, like muscle training, running, and swordsmanship training (basic things, but enough for a normal knight to keel over in exhaustion) before going off to work.

Grail did not know that his subordinates called him 'iron man' behind his back with fear.



After Grail finished his morning training, he would hole up in his room and focus on paperwork.

Then when it was time for the noon break, he put the pen and paper down and left the room.

In this country, people ate large meals, but only twice a day: breakfast and dinner. If there was something around noon, it was a snack.

Grail, too, was not going to eat even though he left his seat at noon. He went in the other direction from the dining hall in the third floor corridor.

Looking outside the window at the end of the corridor, he saw the training ground. It seems that the 6th brigade was using the ground this morning, but now they were moving inside.

The 'division' at this fort, the 9th Division, was divided into 'brigades' that acted on different schedules. The 1st Brigade to the 4th Brigade were guarding the borders, while the 5th Brigade patrolled the city and the 6th Brigade trained.

After people left the training ground, the white fox approached.

It came as expected. Grail smiled. The fox cub looked about to see if there were any people around and crept to the centre.

Because it snowed again yesterday, there were no footprints. The only footprints that were there were those of the 6th brigade.

The cub scanned her surroundings once more, then started running on the snow. At

first she was just walking all over the place, but then she started diving into the snow with a glint in her eyes.

Burying herself into the snow with only her ears and tails out, or rolling and jumping into the snow again.

He saw her play along like this before at the training ground so he thought that she might come again, and he was right.

'It never gets tiring to look at,' thought Grail.

"Ah! If it isn't the Vice-Captain."

At the quiet corridor, a bright voice rung out.

When Grail turned around, his subordinate, who had flamboyant blond hair, was approaching. It was Kix, a promising young soldier, though he had the fault of behaving flippantly.

"Whatcha doing here, sir?"

Kix was one of the few subordinates who spoke to Grail without restraint.

Grail silently pointed to the window with his chin.

"Nn?... Oh, it's a fox!"

Kicks said after he saw the baby fox playing around on the training ground.

"Huh, I guess that's the rumoured white fox."

"Yeah."

Grail nodded.

Truth be told, it was not only Grail that knew of the fox cub.

Many other knights saw the baby fox running about the training ground.

And that rumour spread among all the knights in just four days.

Because of all the snow, in winter the Northern Fort had this depressing feeling, but this lovely baby fox healed the hearts of the knights.

These rough men were happy to find tiny paw prints on the snow.

However, other knights did not know that Grail was taming her. Only the chef knew.

Grail was not hiding it on purpose and would have gladly answered any questions, but no one asked.

“So you like animals, Vice-Captain?”

Kix said as he stared at the baby fox.

He continued talking as his lips were distorted as if to suppress laughter.

“So, like the Branch Captain, you unexpectedly like cute animals?... Pfft, that feels so off.”

To his rude subordinate who finally burst into laughter, Grail flashed a cold smile. He put a hand on Kix’s shoulder.

“Kix, if you have free time, please be my opponent for sparring. I’m not sure if I can go easy though...”

“I’m sorry I apologise I’m sorry.”

After his work was over in the evening, Grail headed to the dining hall. After having his portion, he went to the chef and got the portion for the baby fox as always.

When he went into his room and lit the lights, the baby fox noticed and let out a small bark. She couldn’t wait for the food.

He opened the windows, left the food and went away. Because the fox cub seemed to get nervous when Grail approached.

While she was eating, Grail took his coats off, unlaced his shoes and prepared to take a bath.

A while later, a cry, “Kyan!” could be heard. It was a signal that she finished eating. When Grail approached the window, there was an empty dish on the wooden box and the baby fox was staring over at Grail a little ways off at the shed.

The food seemed to be good, since she was licking her lips many times.

The baby fox looked to have opened up to Grail, but she didn’t seem to trust him fully yet. The subtle distance between the two is the proof of that.

From the moment they met, that distance did not close that much.

Grail wanted to touch the fluffy looking fur of the baby fox, but she became alarmed when he approached.

However, today, he thought that he just might be able to.

Grail had a secret weapon to close that distance in his hand — a piece of jerky that he got from the Chef.

It was made from chicken breast meat, battered into thin strips and baked in an oven. It didn’t have any seasoning, but the flavour of the meat was condensed, that it probably was good enough for human tongues as well.

Grail held up the jerky and shook it at the baby fox.

The baby fox tilted her head, as if to say “Hm?” and approached Grail to check what it was.

When she arrived at the wooden box, she caught the aromatic whiff of the jerky, which made her tail stand straight.

She was still hesitant to approach Grail, but she was bothered by the jerky. She nervously moved about the window, while having her eyes locked on the jerky.

“Here. It’s good.”

Grail tore off a small piece from the jerky, placed it into his hand and stretched his arm out. Up until now, the baby fox never ate directly from his hand. This was a big challenge for Grail too.

He wanted to tell her that there was nothing to fear about human hands.

Lured by the smell, the baby fox placed one paw on the first step off the wooden box. It was the closest she ever got to Grail.

She desperately stretched her neck out, but it seems that she then realised that she had to move in closer to get the jerky. Trembling, she placed one paw on the second step and got on.

She smelled Grail's hands and then smelled the jerky. Meanwhile, Grail was trying his best to not move so that the baby fox won't be surprised.

"She didn't need to sniff that carefully," one might have said from seeing her sniff about cautiously. Then, the baby fox took one piece and swiftly got off the wooden box.

After she got an adequate distance away from Grail, she chewed on her prize.

"Haguhagu."

The wet nose of the baby fox touched his hands, just momentarily. Grail was moved by that feeling. It wasn't as though he had a fetish for noses. He was just happy that she took some food from his hand.

When he tore off another piece, the baby fox approached again, more used to it than last time.

Her appetite might have won over her wariness for people. This time, she didn't take the jerky and got off, but ate next to Grail.

It was the first time she approached Grail this much. 'The power of jerky is amazing,' thought he.

In the end, the baby fox ate the rest of the jerky next to Grail or directly from his hand.

Though it was from food, the distance between the two got closer.

Chapter 8

Crisis

That day, too, began peacefully.

For breakfast, I had the remaining jerky from yesterday, licking every corner to make it softer. To give me something this delicious, as I thought the one-eyed knight is a nice person.

I was now less wary of him because of the jerky. Also, I wasn't so afraid anymore when I approached him now.

Still, I still got nervous when he stared at me, and still darted away when his rough hands reached out to pat my head.

Every time the one-eyed knight made a disappointed face, I also felt sorry — I'm getting good food, I can let him touch my fur a bit — but my instincts as an animal or as a spirit disallowed humans to touch me.

I understood that I wasn't going to be hit, but a big hand slowly falling over my head was a scary sight.

“Patting is no good, huh.”

The one-eyed knight smiled bitterly.

I'm sorry, but it's not possible yet.

I'm not a cheap woman who wags her tail at anyone. You're mistaken if you thought that! Though I have fluffy fur that does not have a single trace of the wild, I am a noble—

“Then, see you later.”

The one-eyed knight closed the window and headed to work.

I'm still talking!

Having finished breakfast, I cautiously went out of the shed, trying to not be spotted. Now, what should I do to kill time until the sun sets?

As a baby fox, I don't have to do work, do household chores, or study. I'm so free every day.

Should I have an adventure in the facility again?

I've been moving around the base quite daringly, but I don't think people other than the one-eyed knight found me out so far. Maybe I have knack for being stealthy.

It's clear this morning, and the temperature seems high for a wintry region. I heard the soldiers say, "It's a hot day today."

No, I don't think it's hot at all. Even though the sun is out, the snow hasn't melted and I think the temperature is lower than that of Tokyo in the dead middle of winter.

Maybe their senses are weird because they spent so much time in this cold.

However, as a snow spirit that has resistance to the cold, I also felt that it was warm today.

This region is cool even in summer--on the mountain where Mother and I live the snow never melts--if I go further down south, I might evaporate from the heat. Even after I grow up and can move around more, I shouldn't go down from the mountains in summer.

It was peaceful again during the daytime.

I waded through the soft snow, and greeted my friends at the stables with nose touches.

Also, these little birds flew around me and picked a fight! I had to fight back...

I thought the animals feared Mother and I because we were spirits, but I found out the unfortunate truth that the animals only feared Mother. When I become an adult and become dignified, I hope won't be belittled by these little birds.

The incident happened when the sun started setting.

The surrounding grew darker and the air got colder in early evening. If it was me from my previous life, used to heating, I might not have been able to withstand the cold, but now I am a furry animal. I'm staying warm thanks to my natural fur.

Only feeling the cold on my wet nose and on my paws, I returned to the shed behind the barracks.

I moved around a lot today, so I'm hungry. I wonder if the one-eyed knight is still working? Or is he preparing dinner for me?

I panted my way towards him, but danger was lurking on my path.

“...?”

At first, I only saw a dark silhouette. It was in a far corner in the dark, so I couldn't discern what it was.

But from the smell that rode the wind, I found out what it was.

A stray dog?

The smell of a beast, and a rough breathing sound. Come to think of it, the silhouette is that of a dog too.

What I thought of from the word ‘dog’ was the common dog that was leashed and walking down the streets. I almost said, “Where are you from!” like an old lady.

However, when I could see it clearly as it approached, I felt danger.

It was a stray dog, not anything cute.

—A wild dog. It's a wild beast that is not controlled by humans.

The air is tense.

Its eyes are bloodshot, looking almost as if they're burning. From its mouth that was panting heavily, I could see sharp fangs. Its sticky saliva dropping on the ground indicated its hunger. It had bulges between its eyes, and a low growl sounded out of its throat.

From my eye level, the wild dog had an intimidating presence, that I shrunk back in fear.

My waist almost gave out, but I managed to hold on with willpower.

However, my hind legs were shaking greatly, which also caused my vision to tremble.

It was definitely looking at me as a prey. It will move in to chomp off my throat and eat me.

The wild dog took a step forth. It lowered its head and was measuring the timing to pounce forth.

The dog is different from the little birds that played around with me during daytime. If I fight back now, I'll die.

I felt true fear for the first time in this body. My paws were drenched in sweat.

Fear of death crept upon me.

Even as I was assaulted by terror, I did not turn my eyes away for my own safety. I slowly backed away without agitating my opponent.

However, getting restless, the dog started dashing here, so I too turned around and ran at full speed.

I got extremely desperate.

I ran up a narrow path that did not have snow. My enemy's legs are longer, so I have to move my feet at a faster pace.

I strained my eyes, and ran—even faster than when I was being chased by those kids.

In the middle, there was a bit that still had snow, but thankfully because it was in the shade the snow had hardened. I'm light, so I was not hindered, but the dog fell in the snow. However, our speeds were still similar.

Here, I had to increase the distance, but because there was mud my escape route was not good. I ran away too carelessly.

"Owah! Wha... What's going on!?"

On the way, there was group of knights but I had no time to pay attention to them.

I ran right in between their legs and kept running. The dog stopped momentarily, but soon resumed chasing me.

The sound of my enemy's panting dominated my ears. I didn't have time to look back, but I could tell that it was chasing me with its tongues out and drooling.

I could feel my enemy's presence right behind me.

Fear crept into my head.

At this rate, I'll be caught...!

--At that moment, I noticed a small pond lying bleakly at the edge of the base.

It was probably man-made. Thus, it was not that large, but it seemed pretty deep. Maybe they dumped the removed snow there, because there were lumps of snow floating around.

There's no ice, but I can tell that it will be painfully cold.

Still, I headed there. If I kept running, it was clear that I could be caught at this rate.

I steeled my resolve and dived into the cold pond.

I dived into the water, but there wasn't that freezing cold I had imagined there would be. I was worried that I might stop breathing because of the low temperature, but that was just a worry.

The reason I didn't feel the cold probably was thanks to my fur.

Especially, my undercoat had air underneath it, that my skin didn't come into direct contact with water.

Then, I don't have to worry about losing body heat too quickly.

However, unlike when I was on the ground, I did feel cold and my muscles started to contract. Though I don't think a snow spirit would freeze to death...

With my feet that became stiff from the cold, I desperately dog-paddled about. I thought that my body would become heavy because the fur would take in water, but the air inside acted as a tube of sorts so it wasn't too hard trying to stay afloat.

The dog that was chasing me stopped at the pond as I thought. While drooling and growling, it circled about the pond so as to not let me go.

Occasionally, it poked the surface of the pond with its legs, but maybe because it was scared of water, or maybe because it was afraid of the cold, it did not jump in. It merely stared at me frustratedly.

For now, I escaped the danger of getting eaten, but it wasn't about to give up anytime soon. It circled the pond and waited for me to come back out.

I glanced at that dog and moved my short legs under the water to swim to the middle of the lake.

-SHAKASHAKASHAKA SHAKASHAKASHAKA-

I kept moving my legs in the water, but because I had been running they were getting tired. However, if I stop moving, my nose will be submerged underwater. There's more danger of drowning than of freezing.

Please give up quickly.

I looked at the wild dog while wishing that, but the famished dog was not about to give up quickly.

I might look round and tasty, but my body is actually mostly fur!

Meanwhile, water started seeping into my undercoat as well. When I felt that cold sensation on my skin, I let out a cry, "Hyah!" like a human. Even though I had resistance to the cold, I could still feel the cold.

My fur gradually grew heavier. It felt as though sticky mud was clinging on to my body.

My legs started to tire out as well.

Dangerous...! I'm in danger now!

Appu! Appu!

I desperately gasped for air.

“Found them! There!”

—At that moment.

The knights I just passed by came.

“The animal in the pond is that baby fox? The one that settled here recently?”

“So it was being chased by that wild dog.”

While saying that, one knight grabbed some snow, hardened it and threw it at the dog. Other knights too hurled snowballs as they approached the wild dog.

After whining a bit from getting hit by hard snowballs, the wild dog eventually gave up.

Even as it sent a frustrated gaze at me, it ran the opposite direction from the knight and jumped over the fence out of the base.

However, I had no leisure to be relieved.

My fur absorbed so much water that it's as heavy as lead! I'm drowning, I'm drowning!

“Here, come here!”

A knight crouched down by the pond and called me over. Because I also wanted to get back on land soon, I swam there, but upon seeing the knight's appearance, I hesitated.

Scary, shaggy bearded man.....

“Come on! You're going to fall in!”

Even that was in a low, gruff voice, that I felt as though I was getting scolded.

This person, he's scary!

The shout of an adult male made me flinch. My big ears twitched. I don't want to go there.

I swam towards the shore, but turned around because the knight there was scary. I decided I'll try somewhere else.

-BASHA BASHA-

I swam about while spraying water everywhere, aiming for the opposite side.

However, there was also another knight there — a brutal looking knight with a buzz cut.

“Here! Climb up here!”

I think I saw a criminal like this on the tv news in my previous life...

In my arbitrary image, I imagined a knight to be ‘a dazzling young man’, but most knights here were muscular, and had scary faces. If they didn’t have their uniforms on, I don’t think anyone would have noticed that they are knights.

These people, they’re good people—chasing away the wild dog—but their appearances had too much impact.

“C’mon, quickly!”

Please don’t say that with those eyes. It’s scary! I hate low and loud voices.

I tried to turn around again, but the five or six knights surrounded the pond, that I didn’t climb up anywhere. Left with no escape route, I circled about the centre of the pond.

“Why isn’t it coming out?”

“It’s scared of your face.”

“Scared of your face, too!”

Stop fighting! You're all scary! It's more or less the same!

"Hey, I got a usable stick!"

Then another knight came. He had a long wooden stick in his hand.

Then he prodded me with that.

"Okay, push!"

"Doing well!"

Pushing by the stick, I was being moved to the opposite side of the pond.

--Where a brutal criminal awaited...

KYAH!!

I frantically paddled about. In panic, I tried to escape the stick.

"Ah, no! Stay still! I'll push you to the shore!"

I think I was panicking. I was chased into a cold pond by a wild dog, and became agitated. Then, scary surrounded me and pushed me with a stick.

Rationally thinking, I know that these knights are trying to help me.

However, right now, I'm confused and I even have this animalistic cautiousness. Even if my life was in danger, my body refused to go into some unknown person's arms.

I was desperate trying to avoid the stick and the knights.

I couldn't even dog-paddle anymore. I merely floundered my legs about and focused on staying afloat.

However, I swallowed water many times and choked already. My throat hurt. I couldn't breathe properly.

My legs are tired, my body is heavy, I think I'll drown at any moment.

MOTHER! MOTHER!

I wanted to cry, that I just let out pathetic voices.

It's impossible now. The wet fur is too heavy. My legs were still moving, but it did not float back up.

I slowly sank, my mouth and my nose submerging.

I can't breathe. It's painful.

My eyes, my head, my ears too sunk into the pond, that my small body was fully submerged in water.

Ah, I'm drowning—!

The moment I felt death, someone grabbed my back and pulled me up with great force.

Ouch! My consciousness started coming back. Then, someone's hand grabbed my belly and lifted me out from the water.

I breathed in oxygen and coughed out water. My legs had become amazingly thin. It's because the wet fur was sticking on the legs.

Because they don't have the usual fluffy fur, they don't feel like my legs.

The person who saves me walked out of the pond towards the shore.

The rather deep pond soaked up to his chest.

Ah, to go into a snow-filled pond at night in the dead middle of winter.

I'm a snow spirit, but a human might get a heart attack.

It's a really dangerous act, just who is it that dived in to save me?

To see the person who saved me, I raised my head.

Is it the bearded knight? Or is it the brutal criminal?

However, what the moonlight revealed was a horrible scar on the left eye.

--The one-eyed knight.

He dived into the cold pond and saved me.

Even as I felt relieved to see him, I thought something rude.

"This person is scary, too.'

Chapter 9

Growing Attached

Mmm... Hot...

Why is it so hot. It is winter, right?

Unpleasant. So very unpleasant.

I slowly opened my eyes with a frown.

Huh? Was I sleeping?

The moment I woke, I tensed up.

I was in what seemed to be an unfamiliar lounge. The room was dyed in soft shades of orange due to the flickering fireplace.

Being near that fireplace was probably why I was hot and displeased.

However, it wasn't why I was tense.

I had woken to find myself on the lap of someone sitting on a sofa.

I was wrapped in a big towel and could only move my head freely, but even without raising my head I could tell from the scent. The person was a complete stranger.



At the very least, it wasn't the one-eyed knight who saved from the pond.

Through the towel, I could feel the stranger's body heat. I instinctively held my breath. I was scared because I didn't know who this was. I didn't want them to realise that I had awoken.

However, my nose itched. I couldn't hold it in, and ended up sneezing helplessly.

"...kushi!"

"Oh, are you awake?"

From above my head, I heard an unknown voice.

However, the voice wasn't that of a man's but the soft voice of a woman's instead. It was a little less scary. Come to think of it, she smelled nice and sweet.

I looked up at her.

"Oh, oh gosh...! It's staring! How cute! What should I do!"

The person who had me on her lap was a female knight in a neat uniform. Her hair was the colour of milk tea and worn in a long pony tail. Her face had both dignified beauty, as well as the cuteness of a young girl.

It was my first time seeing a female knight here.

"Are you cold? We're right next to the fireplace but you just won't warm up" she said as she rubbed my back in concern.

Although it was through the towel, my hairs stood on end from the foreign touch. I wasn't disgusted. I was just wary, or tense.

As a human, I would have welcomed cute women, but my foxy self didn't seem to. The female knight looked kind, but she was a stranger, so I couldn't rest easy on her lap.

I had the impulse to jump off and run off into a corner, but I didn't have the guts to. Instead, I just turned to stone on her lap.

The one-eyed knight should have been here.

I darted my eyes about and searched around the room, but there was no one else in the room but me and the female knight. I could smell the trace of the men who used this room, but the few sofas were all empty.

My heart beat fast, and my wish that she would let me go seemed to have been conveyed.

“Don’t be so scared. Your heart feels like it’s going to burst. I’m not going to hurt you,” she said with worry.

I guess she could feel my heartbeat.

Her soft voice calmed me, and I could understand what she was saying.

But, my instincts didn’t allow humans to approach so easily.

Unknown voice, unknown smell, unknown person, scary.

My instincts kept urging me to be wary, and my body kept stiffening.

Moreover, I was bothered about the flame from the fireplace. It was my first time seeing fire, but apparently it didn’t bode well with me. Humans might have felt warmth from this distance, but for me it was too hot.

She probably meant to warm my cold body, but I’d have preferred diving back into that snow-filled pond. It’s hot!

I couldn’t bear it anymore, so I forced my way out and took some distance from the fireplace.

“Ah...”

The female knight stared at me and looked at the towel I shed in disappointment.

“Come here. Isn’t it cold over there?”

No, it’s not cold.

My body was still wet, but I don’t think a snow spirit would catch a cold from this.

I shook my small body like a dog, letting in air to my fur which was sunk.

However, because I was being covered in a towel, the fur was still stuck to my body.
My pride and joy, my fur...

Oh well, once it dried I was back to my usual fluffy fur.

“Come here.”

While I was crouching down and licking my front feet to do my fur, the female knight stood up and approached.

Her footsteps were very light, maybe to avoid surprising me, but her figure grew larger and larger, and I couldn’t help but run away.

She wasn’t particularly tall, but for a baby fox like me all humans were big.

I quickly ran away to a dark corner in the room. The female knight looked shocked.

“Am I that scary?”

I felt sorry when I saw her face sink.

Sorry, sorry. I’m not scared of you, but I’m scared of strangers.

When I leaned up against the wall, the female knight stopped approaching.

“Right, it is a wild animal. Of course it would be afraid of people.”

At distance, she crouched down, lowering her eye level.

“I’m not scary. I’m just going to touch you a bit~”

She beckoned me over.

However, seeing that I didn’t budge in the slightest, she changed her plan.

“Hm, I’ll need some food to let her guard down,” she murmured before standing up.

At the same moment, a heavy looking door opened and one man came in.

He had short grey hair, and a long scar down his left eye.

When I realised the man was the one-eyed knight, I felt so relieved that the tension left my body.

So much that I was surprised by it.

Though she was a beautiful woman, I was more anxious than I thought at being alone in a room with a stranger.

The female knight turned around and talked to the one-eyed knight with a crestfallen expression.

“Vice-Captain, it’s afraid of women as well. It was impossible for me.”

“...I see. I thought it would be better than rough men, but it looks like people’s sex doesn’t matter to wild animals.”

The two spoke while staring at me. I was wondering about why I was with a stranger instead of the one-eyed knight who saved me, but it seems that he was being considerate.

“I was planning on keeping her here until it could grow independent, but it’s sad to see her shivering like that. Maybe it might be better to let her out.”

“But what if she’s attacked by wild dogs again... Right, Vice-Captain, you were giving food to her, weren’t you? Wouldn’t she open up a bit to you then?”

“...No, not really. She just ate the food I gave her, but she never opened up to me.”

The one-eyed knight said that without changing his expression too much, but seemed a bit sad.

Indeed, I was attracted by the tasty food, and never followed him for real.

However, it was different now.

I was confident that he wouldn’t hurt me now. Because the one-eyed knight dived into a cold pond to save me.

To think, ‘Won’t he hurt me?’ to person who saved me would be contradictory and strange.

From the beginning, he didn’t feel like a bad person, but from this incident my trust for him rose greatly. My animalistic guard towards him too was almost gone.

With a light ‘tatata’ footstep sound, I trotted towards the one-eyed knight past the female knight.

I felt him flinch slightly, but I paid it no mind and put my nose at this feet. It seems that he changed his clothes after he went into the pond, since his trousers and his boots were dry, and didn’t smell of water. I could only smell the warm reassuring scent.

I wagged my tail unconsciously.

“...You said that it didn’t open up to you, but what’s this! Vice-Captain, it’s unfair! I’m jealous!”

Behind me, I could hear the female knight’s angry voice.

“No... I think she just thinks that I’ll give her food...”

Even as he said that, he looked surprised to see me wag my tail.

His voice was shaking. It was the first time I approached him this closely when he didn’t have food or jerky on him.

He already helped me at the pond. Those rough hands weren’t scary anymore. It wasn’t too hard after that first contact.

The one-eyed knight’s big hands wouldn’t hurt me. Rather, they would protect me.

I shook my tail which was half as fluffy as usual because it was still wet. I raised my head and stared into his eyes. My neck hurt.

The one-eyed knight stared at me absent-mindedly for a bit, then started rummaging through his pockets as though he thought up something.

Then he brought out a piece of jerky, then he held that out. Because he crouched down, his face came closer.

"I see, you came because you could smell this."

Though he was smiling, he looked a little disappointed when he said that.

However, the jerky that was held out didn't stimulate my appetite. I wasn't hungry now.

Rather, I was surprised that he thought it was because of the food. I didn't come because I was attracted by the jerky.

I just thought I would feel relaxed around him. Also, I wanted to thank him.

Seeing me not go for the jerky, the one-eyed knight looked puzzled. "What's wrong? You like this, don't you?"

He poked it at my nose to make me confirm the smell.

I know! I know it's a tasty piece of jerky!

I ignored that jerky and stared at the one-eyed knight.

"Vice-Captain... she's not attracted to the food. She's grown attached to you," said the female knight from behind me.

Good, explain that well to this dense man.

"But, she wasn't this this morning. Why would she suddenly like me now?"

"She understands that you helped her. Isn't she saying thank you?"

Amazing! The female knight spoke for me so well!

'Thank you for helping me back then,' or so I wanted to convey, so I licked his fingers.

Get across, my feelings! After licking his fingers intently, I ended up licking my nose from habit.

Then, I looked up at the one-eyed knight.

For a moment, he looked astounded and was frozen in place. He then brushed back

his short hair and hid his hair.

But I saw. I saw his expression loosen up into a happy one. It was a rare expression.

“How nice, I’m jealous,” the female knight suddenly said.

She didn’t seem like a bad person.

I think I can open up to her after some time. Let’s get to know each other slowly. Please wait a bit more until my instincts are no longer wary of you.

“It’s already late today. It doesn’t seem to be hungry, so we should get her to sleep.”

Having regained his composure, the one-eyed knight said that while looking at me. I was unconscious until just now but I was still sleepy.

“It’s dangerous outside. Even though this is a base for knights, there are still many dangers around. Like today, there might be more wild dogs that came for food.”

Though he probably saw me as just a baby fox, not a spirit that could understand human words, he stared straight at me and said that. I was so happy about that, that my tail wagged faster.

Seeing this, the two knights laughed.

“What is she so happy about?”

“Too cute. She shouldn’t wag her tail when she’s being told that it’s dangerous.”

“Anyhow, I don’t think it would be good for a wild animal to be raised by a human, but I have no plans to turn you into wild dog food. Until you grow up, I’ll raise you.”

I was happy to hear his declaration.

The wild dogs were still scary. It was much better to be protected and safe inside the buildings.

However, I think I could only stay for about ten more days. Mother was coming back soon

I couldn't stay here 'until I grew up'.

I was happy that Mother was coming back, but it would be sad to part from the one-eyed knight.

Then, at least until then, I'll get spoiled by him and enjoy the life here.

I thought that and wagged my tail wildly.

Since the one-eyed knight waved his hand in beckoning, I parted with the female knight and followed him out of the room.

Chapter 10

Iron Man

My legs are short.

Even though I am moving almost as if I am running, it is slow compared to the one-eyed knight striding through the hallways.

I desperately moved my legs to not get separated from him.

Wait up!

Of course, he wouldn't have heard my mental cry, but the one-eyed knight turned around and looked at me.

Then, seemingly realising that I was far behind him and desperately running, he stopped and waited for me, then moved with slow steps.

Ah, what a relief.

Then, from time to time, he glanced back at me to check if I was following him properly, but it looks like there's some other purpose as well.

He's usually expressionless, but when he looks here his expression loosens up.

Well, I am very cute in this world! Or so I thought narcissistically, but it seems that he's also happy that I am following him.

From the fact that a baby fox was following him even without a leash, his expression loosened.

After many intervals of him turning around, we arrived at a door. It's a simple, but sturdy wooden door like the ones I saw in the hallways on the way here.

When the one-eyed knight opened the door, there was somehow familiar room. It wasn't that wide, and only had the necessary furniture and lighting, along with few

books and a sword.

However, when I followed in after the one-eyed knight, I noticed that the room smelled like him.

I see. So this is the one-eyed knight's room. Because I always looked into this room from the window, which is opposite from the door, I didn't realise that fact right away.

"Living inside might be uncomfortable, but sleep here today. During daytime, I will let you out as much as possible. I'll also make you practice hunting so that you can get food on your own."

The one-eyed knight spoke to me softly.

Uu—, I don't want to hunt. As if I can catch mice. Rather than my reflexes, there's the problem of a biological detest... I don't even want to bite it, nor less eat it!

As my ears and tail drooped, the one-eyed knight said, "Wait a bit," then exited the room.

Then, I sensed people's presence outside.

I perked up my ears.

"Vice-Captain, how was the baby fox?"

"Still wary?"

"Rather, when did you tame it?"

"It's unfair."

"You left us behind."

Soft whispering voices denounced the one-eyed knight.

Come to think of it I did feel that there were people following me. So it wasn't just a feeling.

It seems that the story of me getting attacked by the wild dog spread quickly among

the knights here. So like primary school boys wanting to see the dog that sneaked into school, they gathered here.

“You guys, it’s too loud.”

The one-eyed knight sighed dumbfoundedly.

“As I said, the baby fox is not used to people. I am taking care of it, but don’t get too close. It will get scared.”

From that, I felt happy that the one-eyed knight was being considerate for me. Maybe there weren’t people in the hallways or in the corridors — though they were secretly tailing us — because the one-eyed knight was being considerate for me.

I was greeted by a kind female knight when I woke up.

Outside the room, the young knights complained for a bit, but suddenly everyone started mumbling. The one-eyed knight probably silenced them with his sharp glare. Shut up, or so.

“...Oh, oops, it’s already this late! We have to return to our rooms.”

“R-Right. Sorry we bothered you late in the evening, Vice-Captain...!”

After some time passed in silence, a young knight purposefully raised his voice in a somewhat scared tone. Other knights anxiously followed suit.

The presences of people busily dispersed. He only has one eye, but the one-eyed knight is amazing.

A while after that, the one-eyed knight did not come in straight away, but went somewhere with soft footsteps.

To calm myself from the fear of being alone, I munched on the bed legs. With my small fangs and my weak jaws, I could only make shallow marks, I felt annoyed for some reason.

While I was playing around, the one-eyed knight came back. Because my big ears caught his footsteps already, I stopped biting the bed legs and sat down on the bed. In addition, I even wagged my tail. I waited like a good kid~.

When he opened the doors and saw me, he smiled softly.

Wahaha, he got fooled so easily!

The one-eyed knight had a basket in his hand. He placed that next to his bed and beckoned me over. What is it? When I went over, there was a blanket over the basket.

Could this be my bed?

I kicked the floor and hopped into the basket. Because I didn't like that the basket was folded so squarely, I shook it around.

It's much fluffier and better when it's a bit messed up like this.

I did realise that the one-eyed knight was smiling bitterly, but feeling very satisfied I rolled up my body on the wrinkled blanket.

The basket, being made from natural materials, smelled of plants.

The size wasn't too big, and fit me. This somewhat tight feeling made me very calm.

“Good night.”

As the one-eyed knight said, I closed my eyes.

I thought that he would of course go to sleep on his bed, but he did not budge from his position. I was somewhat bothered, but I still started falling asleep. As I was sinking into a dream, something gently stroked my head.

The one-eyed knight's hand?

Maybe it's the first time he's petting me.

Half asleep and half awake, I thought that. Though that's because I fled.

Maybe because I didn't open my eyes in rejection, he started stroking me a bit more confidently.

Over and over again so that he can enjoy my fur.

Hey...

I can't sleep.



The next day, I woke up first. I gaped my mouth and let out a yawn.

Being a young fox, I fall asleep easily, but I wake up just as easily. I stood up and climbed out of the basket. My white fur was fully dry now. 20% dryness, 80% comfort, it was back to the usual feeling.

Now this is more like my fur.

I turned my head to the bed next to me, and saw that the one-eyed knight was still sleeping. Since he was sleeping while looking over here, I could see his face as well.

Usually, the defenceless sleeping faces are cute or funny, but the one-eyed knight was different.

The moment I saw his sleeping face, my hairs stood straight.

The one-eyed knight was sleeping with a serious expression, his mouth shut tight, and with a frown.

Really intimidating.

His eyes are closed, but it almost feels as though he's glaring at me.

If I was an assassin, I probably won't be able to kill him. Is he really sleeping? Or so I would get jittery. The moment the knife was swung to take his life, he was indeed awake and the one who was killed was the attacker. I could imagine such a scene.

I collapsed on the floor — my waist gave out — and was staring at his face, but suddenly he woke without any sign.

Then I noticed that he was staring at me with a frown on his face.

Scary!

“Hyan...” or “Hin...”, an incomplete cry escaped my throat.

I-Is he angry? Did I do something wrong?

The one-eyed knight took his eye off me, slowly rose and scratched his head.

His face was still scary. His eyes are too sharp.

Then, for a bit, he stared off into vacant space absent-mindedly.

When he turned around towards me, the frown was gone. His eyes weren't sharp either, and he was looking at me with a kind gaze.

“Ah, right, I made you sleep here. Morning.”

I let out a sigh in my head. It takes about 20 seconds for his brain to come fully awake after he opens his eyes.

When he's unconscious, he's about 30% scarier. Tomorrow, I'll take greater care to not let my waist give out.

The one-eyed knight got off the bed and walked barefoot on the cold floor. From above, a hand came down gently and stroked my head.

For a moment, I shut my eyelids tightly. Seeing me like that, the hand moved away slightly.

However, when I didn't run away and looked at him again, the warm hand softly stroked my head again. I dislike the heat of the fire, but I don't dislike the warmth of this hand.

Having stroked me enough, the one-eyed knight started changing.

Panicking, I pretended to chew on the blanket inside the basket. I didn't see~, I didn't see~.

After that, the one-eyed knight briefly left the room, maybe to wash his face. He came back in soon and picked up the sword. I wonder if he's going out to train? Indeed, his clothes were light for a knight going out to work. To train his body even though he didn't need to, how amazing.

"I'll be back soon. I'll give you food then."

Picking up the sword, he went out. I would gladly stay quietly in the room —— not, so just before the door closed I sneaked out. Because I didn't make a sound, the one-eyed knight didn't notice me.

After waiting for him to lock the door, I followed him through the cold hallways.

It went well, but just after we headed out the one-eyed knight suddenly turned around.

He looked down here and opened his eyes wide.

Why is it here? was what his expression was saying.

"When did you... you want to come along with me? It's not going to be fun though."

It's going to be more boring to wait inside, so I want to tag along.

Thinking that, I wagged my tail once.

With a faint smile, the one-eyed knight let me follow.

It was clear in the morning.

However, it was very cold.

Well, I didn't feel the cold that much, but it probably was painful for humans. If they breathed in the crisp dawn air, their lungs might freeze. It's a refreshing morning, but it would be impossible to breath in deeply.

On the training grounds, the snow was still piled, and some of the melted snow from yesterday had frozen up.

I'm saying this again, but I don't feel that cold. I have my fur, and I'm a spirit of snow.

And I'm saying this again, but it's painful for humans. It's strange if isn't cold for them...

The one-eyed knight started off with light stretches and ran laps around the grounds. Then, suddenly, he took off his shirt and started swinging his sword.

His body probably did get warm from running around, but... not in this cold! It probably cooled off already.

...The one-eyed knight must be an iron man.

Chapter 11

Female Knight Tina

Tina is the only female knight at the Northern Fort.

To begin with, there aren't many female knights, and this is the frontier.

However, Tina was not demoted here, but volunteered to come here.

She came out of the thought that if she can survive the harsh life of the Northern Fort surrounded by snow, her willpower will grow as well as her confidence as a knight.

In the knightly orders, women are scorned, but it would be different if she survives the Northern Fort. Everyone will acknowledge her.

That's just how hard life here is.

Which is why Tina is about the only one who came here by her own will.

Other people came here because they caused accidents at the Capital or at other branches. "Go grow some backbone!" Or so they were chased out to this place.

There is only Mother Nature around the fort, in winter there's the endless snow-clearing work to do, and one has to survive the terrifying training of the 'Iron Man Vice-Captain'. Thus, some young knights even look grimly resolute on their first day here.

After tidying herself, Tina slowly exited her room.

Though she is a female knight, it wasn't as though a separate building will be prepared for just one rookie knight. Like the male knights, Tina too is assigned a room to sleep in. However, while other young knights share a room among two to four people, Tina uses hers alone.

Furthermore, the 'Icy Branch Captain' lives in the room next door, and the 'Iron Man Vice-Captain' lives across her room. It may be thanks to the the Branch Captain and

the Vice-Captain that Tina never felt danger to her person even as she lived in a building full of men.

Tina suddenly looked at the door across from her room. The room of the admired Vice-Captain Grail.

Grail did not come here because he was demoted like other knights, but came here from the request of the Knight Captain in the Capital to fix things up here. He has been the Vice-Captain here for some years here.

There aren't that many superiors that are this trustworthy, Tina thought. The same went for the other knights as well. Even though they feared him, they also respected him.

It was still early in the morning, but there was no presence of anyone sleeping inside. It seems that the rumour that he trains before the sun rises every day is true. Today, the weather is clear but the temperature has dropped a lot.

Tina puffed out white breaths as she shivered.

To have breakfast at the dining hall, she locked her doors and passed in front of the room of the 'Icy Branch Captain'. It seems that the Branch Captain also wakes up early, but he isn't training outside like the Vice-Captain. Maybe he's reading inside.

As for the Branch Captain..... Tina thought that she was the only one who came here by her own will, but she recently learned that it was not.

She didn't hear it directly from him, but it seemed that Branch Captain also volunteered for the Northern Fort. Though Tina did not know the reason because she was not that friendly with the Branch Captain.

As Tina quietly proceeded through the hallways, a door suddenly opened in front of her.

A blond knight who still had a boyishness came out. His name was Kix, and he joined the knights in the same year as Tina did — though he was two years her senior when it comes to living here.

In this fort, there are only about eighty knights, so most people know each other.

"Oh, it's Tina. Morning."

"Morning, Kix."

She greeted the young man in front of her, even as she felt that something was off at meeting him so early.

"What is it? You still have time to sleep. You woke up quite early today."

She doesn't wake as early as Grail, but Tina also wakes up quite early. Around thirty minutes afterwards, everyone else wakes up and the quarters become noisy, so she wakes up early to prepare.

However, Kix was weak in the mornings..... To Tina's words, Kix replied with a yawn.

"Night shift. I'm going to have food then sleep."

"Ah, I see. Border patrol last night?"

"Right. Boring as always."

One the main duties given to the knights of the Northern Fort is border patrol. However, there wasn't any recent war with the neighbouring country, nor were there any illegal immigrants.

It's because there is a mountain range between this country and the neighbouring country. With Mt. Snowlea as the centre, the mountain range is hard to cross.

These mountains are snowy mountains with high altitude, that there's even snow in summer that people get lost or die of cold. Long time ago, there may have been people trying to sneak into the country, but they would have all lost their lives before the knights at the fort found them.

Thus, border patrol duty is hard because one does not need to do anything.

One of the other duties is the patrolling of the nearby towns and villages. Not only do the knights just observe the people's lives, they hunt down stray beast that wandered into villages and also help with clearing the snow.

Also, patrolling the foot of Mt. Snowlea is also an important duty.

Having immense power, the spirit would be an attractive target to greedy people.

There are people who come to Mt. Snowlea to pray to the spirit, but there are also those who visit with wicked intentions to make the spirit's power their own.

Of course, even if someone did try, they would exhaust themselves from the cold before they reach the top, but we still can't let our guard down.

Because the Snow Spirit Snowlea is a thankful spirit that protects the country. Even the king himself ordered that we knights should pay more attention to protecting Mt. Snowlea than the borders.

Indeed, if a spirit is captured by an individual or by another country, that in itself is a great loss to the country. There aren't many spirits that are cooperative to humans like Snowlea.

For good or for bad, spirits are cold-hearted. Fundamentally, they do not intervene in human affairs, but Snowlea is different.

Tina has never seen the spirit, but according to the rumours she is a breathtaking beauty.

It's not just Tina wants meet such an existence that transcended humanity. Her colleague knights also joke, "I want to see for myself how beautiful she is."

"If you're going to the dining hall, let's go together."

To Tina's words, Kix cheerfully said "Yes," and nodded his head.

When they arrived at the dining hall, there weren't many people. For Tina, it was the usual scenery, but Kix murmured, "Looks easy to find a seat."

Kix suddenly stopped and looked puzzled. Since Tina knew that he had surprisingly good observation skills, she also looked around.

Indeed, it is strange. Their colleague knights' gazes were pointed at one direction.

While they ate bread and soup, their facial muscles were all loose.

"What the, how unpleasant."

Kix bluntly exclaimed. Tina felt the same.

However, when she turned toward where their gazes pointed at, she too understood.

“Ah! Yesterday... Mil-chan!”

At one end of the dining hall, Vice-Captain Grail was eating after his morning training, but there was also white fur by his feet.

On closer examination, that furball had proper ears and tails. It was the baby fox.

Tina felt relaxed and comfortable. Just by seeing that lovely animal, she was healed. She couldn't possibly criticise the other knights.

“Mil?... Aa, the rumoured baby fox? But why is it here? And why is it following Vice-Captain?”

As she explained what happened last night — How it was attacked by a wild dog, and how it came to be placed under the protection of Vice-Captain, who had already been feeding it — Tina approached Grail and the baby fox.

It seemed that the baby fox had just finished eating, since it was dejectedly licking the empty dish. However, it became alarmed by Tina's approach and hid in the shade of Grail's long legs.

“Mil-chan, it's me~ Remember me from yesterday?”

Tina made the kindest voice possible.

Then, the baby fox twitched its ears, and cautiously peaked out from behind Grail's legs.

From that, Tina almost got a nose bleed. The same probably went for the other people in the dining hall.

How the baby fox was so naturally stepping on Grail's boot was irresistible. The baby fox had its attention focused here, that it did not realise it either.

“You named it?”

Tina, who was breathing hard in front of the baby fox, came to her senses from Grail's cool words.

He had finished his meal and was looking here.

"G-Good morning, Vice-Captain! Sorry for making a fuss."

"Good morning, Vice-Captain."

Tina greeted him in panic, while Kix greeted him as usually.

"Ah! The name..... well, I just named it in my mind after I saw it in the base."

While she was breaking out in cold sweat, she gave an excuse. It was not as though she was trying to be a godmother.

Kix asked interestedly.

"Why Mil?"

"It's embarrassing since it's so simple..... because it's white like milk."

When Tina explained while blushing,

"Come to think of it, I forgot to name it. It's easy to remember, so Mil is good, don't you think? Right, Mil?"

Grail briskly gave an okay. The baby fox also wagged its tail in approval. Though it might just have been their imagination, its eyes looked to be gleaming, looking happy.

"Is it okay? The name I thought up..... I-I'm happy."

"Anyway, Vice-Captain, you never told us that you were feeding it. Why were feeding it in secret for. Unfair."

"I just didn't tell you because you never asked."

"That kid is the idol of the Northern Fort, you're monopolising it. Unfair. Low."

Kix's good point is that he is friendly to anyone. That is also his bad point.

When Vice-Captain said, "How about training after a night shift," he finally shut up. However, he did not seem dejected. With an energetic voice, he called out to the baby fox.

"Come here, Mil~!"

Seeing Kix approaching it without hesitation, the baby fox hid behind Grail's legs again.

"Stop. Don't scare it."

"Don't raise your voice like that."

Tina and Grail simultaneously warned Kix.

"Sorry..... but I still want to touch it. It looks so fluffy."

Kix crouched down and stared at the baby fox with a boyish expression.

Feeling that gaze, the baby fox curled up even more. It was almost as though its heartbeats could be heard where Tina was.

"It takes time to get close to Mil. She didn't open up to me yet either."

When Tina said that a little sadly, the baby fox peeked out and let out a cry -kyunkyun-as if she was making an excuse.

She didn't know what the baby fox was trying to say. But she knew that its cries are cute. That was a fact.

Then, Tina and others talked for some more time, but when the baby fox started getting tense because there were more people started coming into the dining hall, Grail stood up.

"Now, I'll get it... get Mil back to the room. It still doesn't seem used to having people around her."

When Grail went to return the food trays, the baby fox followed in panic. Maybe it was afraid if it wasn't near Grail, since it was moving its short legs desperately, which was also lovely.

At the counter, the chef asked, "Was the food nice?" The baby fox flinched a bit from the low voice, but she quickly let about a cry,

"Kyun."

"It's as if it's replying."

"How does it know that it's being talked to?"

Observing that, Tina and Kix gave their impressions. The two of them were still here for breakfast, but Grail quickly left after returning the trays and having a short conversation with the chef.

The knights stared as they left the dining hall. Since they knew the circumstances well unlike Kix, they were quietly observing.

The baby fox became a source of joy for the Northern Fort which did not have much in terms of entertainment. Tina thought so as she saw the men whose expressions had melted as they watched the baby fox.

In this land trapped by snow, it was always somehow depressing, but it was different this winter.

Just from seeing the baby fox chase after Grail, everyone softened. From seeing it move busily, the mood brightened.

However, seeing Grail only slow down not pick the baby fox up even when he saw it chasing after him desperately, Tina smiled wryly because it was so like Grail.

If it was me, I would have gladly hugged it, but that wouldn't help the baby fox, Tina thought.

Grail was being both strict and kind because he knew that it had to return to nature some time.

"By the way, does the Branch Captain know?"

While seeing Grail and the baby fox off, Kix asked.

"Vice-Captain must have made a report, no? Even if he didn't, I think he would within

the day."

"I see. I want to see how 'The Icy Branch Captain' would react when he sees that baby fox."

Kix said with a grin.

Chapter 12

The Tragedy Of The Fox Cub And The Unmanageable Clothes

I was named.

The female knight Tina named me.

My name here is 'Mil'. It's Mil from Milk, but coincidentally it was the same as my real name Milfiria.

Since I'm not able to talk yet, I couldn't introduce myself, so I was happy that I was called by the name Mother gave me, even if it was a coincidence.

I was glad that I wasn't getting called 'Shiro' because I'm white, or 'Chibi' because I'm small, or something simplistic like that.

Well, Mil from Milk is pretty simple too.

But still, getting called Chibi but growing big is a bit awkward, you know?

Anyhow, I safely escaped from the crowded dining hall and was following the one-eyed knight through the hallways with quick footsteps.

When I encountered someone on the narrow aisle, I hid myself as much as possible behind the one-eyed knight's legs. Meeting strangers is nerve-wracking.

I wasn't like this in my previous life, but I am afraid of strangers in this life. Maybe it's because I only saw Mother since I was born.

The one-eyed knight was saluted by everyone passing by. Maybe he has a high position. Also, he was called 'Vice-Captain'.

Come to think of it, I still don't know his name.

We returned to his room. The one-eyed knight took his shirt off, and was preparing for work.

Will he take me along? Or am I to stay here?

While thinking that, I silently observed the one-eyed knight's actions. It's not going to be fun staying here, so if possible I want to accompany him.

"I'll come back once, at noon."

I looked at him with expectant eyes, but it was in vain. The one-eyed knight said that, looking down here while preparing for work.

House-sitting, huh...

My ears and my tail visibly drooped.

"I'm going out patrolling this morning with my subordinates. You can't ride a horse."

The one-eyed knight smiled slightly.

I can ride a horse. If you lift me up, I'll balance myself. Also, I'm quite friendly with the horses at the stables.

However, I do realise that I might bother him if I'm there. I'll behave well.

I gave up and headed to my bed, the basket with a blanket.

Then, the one-eyed knight hastily came over here.

"I'll be back by noon."

He said that and patted my head.

I heard that already.

After that, he patted me for about five more minutes, then headed to work with slightly sad looking eyes.

"I'll be back by noon."

I know, I know. It's the third time I'm hearing it.

I'll be a good kid until noon.

The moment the one-eyed knight left the room, I climbed into bed. What a lovely body not related in any way to insomnia.

However, I did sleep well yesterday, so I couldn't sleep until noon.

I woke up about an hour later — though this is just a guess since there weren't any clocks — and rolled around on the blanket or chewed on the basket handles. However...

I'm bored.

I'm bored to death!

If I at least had a toy. In the one-eyed knight's room, there wasn't anything like a toy.

I climbed out of bed and stared out the window. However, I could only see the sky. It's because the window is placed quite high.

In the morning, it was clear, but now thick clouds covered the sky and pouring snow down. Big and wide ones.

Flutter, flap flap, flutter.

When I stared at the snow, my tail started wagging on its own. I could find a pattern to the wagging. Watching snow fall makes me excited. Though I don't feel that when rain falls making a *saa* sound.

I joyfully looked out the window for a bit, but ultimately got tired of doing that so next I looked around the room.

I wanted to play around so I climbed onto the one-eyed knight's big bed. It's soft and fluffy so it's fun. However, the bed was full of the one-eyed knight's smell, and that was a bit embarrassing so I hurriedly came down. What am I doing.

The next target is the table by the window. I could see documents, a feather pen and an ink bottle on top of the table. There were also some old, thick books.

Come to think of it, I wonder if I can read the letters of this country?

I got interested, so I first tried to climb the chair. Since I don't yet have the jumping power to climb directly onto the table.

I first put my paws on the chair and hopped many times, trying to get up.

But it wasn't going very well. My hind legs, do your best!

Let's get up now! I jumped with all my strength. At the same time, I supported my weight with my forelegs.

The upper half of my body made it up, but the lower half was still hanging midair. I rapidly fluttered my legs midair to climb up with the momentum.

If I become careless, I'll fall right away.

Uooh, to your best, my forelegs! Lift up the lower half!

When I somehow managed to climb up the chair, I felt a sense of accomplishment. My forelegs trembled.

Thankfully, climbing onto the table from the chair was easier since the height difference wasn't that much.

The scenery from the top of the table was somewhat fresh. Looking from a high ground made me excited.

Now then... I thought and headed to the books. I tried to read the letters on the covers, but I couldn't. It's as if someone took the latin alphabet and made it more complicated. I don't remember seeing this in my previous life either.

So I need to study properly. What was that... I was wondering if I can read it with the spirit's power — going -paa- — or something, but it's impossible, I see.

Indeed, it wasn't as though I understood the spoken language either. I practiced from listening to Mother, or so should I say. However, I do think that my learning ability was better than human babies. I'm not sure if it's because I'm a spirit or if it's because I have knowledge from my previous life.

I opened the book on top skilfully with my nose. The smell of paper wet with ink spread.

I traced the letters with my eyes. Yup, I don't know!

When I grow older, I'll learn from Mother.

I gave up on reading and turned around on the small table. To go back down on the chair, and onto the floor.

However, when I turned around, my front foot collided with something small and hard. The thing kicked by me was a bottle of ink that wasn't closed properly.

Needless to say, ink is liquid. It's not very viscous either. So the moment I knocked it over, the ink started spreading over the table. I couldn't stop it.

Also, ink is black. There's nothing blacker than it.

I merely stared at the black thing spill over important documents.

I heard that people actually become calm in emergencies.

While watching the black ink seep into the white paper and the wooden table, I only calmly watched and thought, "Ah, what should I do..." My brain wasn't admitting the fact that ink was spilled.

After the ink arrived near the books, my brain finally started working. I pushed the books with my nose to put it far away from the menace of ink.

However, I pushed too much and they fell off the table.

-basabasabasa- With impressive sounds, the books fell on the floor. My brain stopped working again.

It's okay, it's okay.

I consoled myself and cautiously peeked down below from the table. There, I saw the the horrible corpses of the books that were forced to perform death leaps. Ah...

For now, I came down as well. I can't do anything about the ink that was already spilled

on the table. It can't be saved.

However, reorganising the scattered books would be possible for me, with my front feet that have paws.

With the tip of my nose, with my mouth and front feet, I organised the books on the floor. I also properly closed the books that flipped open when they fell on the floor.

While working I noticed something.

The books were soiled with ink.

Strange. I did drop them from the table, but I thought I saved them from the black menace.

But I soon found out the ugly cause of this tragedy.

Could my front paws... be dyed black with ink...

Stupidly enough, it seems that I failed to realise that my feet were soaked in ink.

I swallowed hard. My heart beat fast.

It's okay, it's okay.

Even as I trembled nervously, I looked around the room.

The floor, the chair, wherever I walked, black paw prints dirtied the room.

On the table, the ink was dripping down from the table on the floor, making its mark.

This is... Well...

Calm down, calm down.

I have to make up for it, let's run my little brain on full power.

It doesn't seem like something so convenient like tissues exist in this world. There isn't even a rag in the room. Even if there was one, I won't be able to handle it well with my hands, and I won't be able to wipe away all the ink.

It will merely continue to spread.

“...”

Cold sweat formed on my paws.

W-W-W-What should I do!!

At this rate, the one-eyed knight will become angry. I have to clean this up before he comes back!

I anxiously walked back and forth on the spot.

However, I saw that the floor was getting dirtier from that, so I hurriedly stopped moving. It's better to not move rashly. My legs are currently cursed by ink. Let's not spread the damage.

Ink spilling from the table, documents dyed in black, traces of black pawprints on the chair, the floor and the scattered books...

From this devastating scene, I just wanted to cover my eyes.

Chapter 13

The Icy Branch Captain

Having returned to the fort from patrolling, Grail took off his coat and gloves that got wet from the snow and moved to his quarter.

He did move the swords and the spare blades elsewhere, but he was still worried if Mil was well without any injuries. That baby fox is not yet used to living indoors.

'I didn't leave anyone there since I thought she was shy, but maybe I should have asked someone that was off duty.'

While moving, he went over if he left anything dangerous in the room. To begin with, he didn't have any needless furniture or luggage, and he even cleaned the floor. He didn't want those soft paws to get scratched, so he didn't miss a single splinter on the wooden floor.

He spotted his room door, so he took out the key from his pocket and put it into the keyhole with experienced movements. He was impatient, but because Mil might have been sleeping inside, he opened the door gently.

"Mil?"

He naturally began with looking towards the baby fox's bed, the basket with the blanket. However, the basket was empty, and after Grail looked around the room he froze up.

He could only see one colour. Black, black, black.

...What is this.

There is a table in the inside of the room, and on that was a fallen ink bottle. The ink was dying the half-written documents and the table, black. The ink dripping from the table was also dirtying the chair and the floor, turning Grail's room into a desolate state.

Just what happened in my room. He thought that it might be a thief, that his face distorted into a scary expression. However, from the culprit's small black tracks all over the room, it didn't take long to identify who the culprit was.

Grail sighed and laughed a little. He was worried, but he felt relieved after he found out the culprit's identity. The books that were placed on the table when he was writing documents were also neatly organised on the floor with pawprints on them. Might this also be the doing of Mil? Just what was she trying to do?

"Mil?"

Grail looked around his room again. In this bland room, there isn't much of a hiding place. The black pawprints also betrayed the culprit's location. Grail looked under his bed without hesitation.

"..."

The white baby fox was there.

Under the bed, at the furthest corner in the dark.

"Mil."

When Grail called her, Mil twitched here and stared here. She was properly looking at Grail. However, she did not look at his eyes.

She had guilty face, while she hid the ink-stained front feet under her body. Was she trying to hide the evidence?

When he stared under the bed for a while, Mil carefully turned her gaze towards him while hanging her head down. However, when their eyes met, she immediately turned her gaze. She stared somewhere else with a strained expression.

She was hiding her dirty feet, and was holing up under the bed, trying to not meet Grail's gaze. Those attitudes showed that she was the culprit.

First, it shows on the face.

If she wasn't related, she wouldn't make such a grim expression.

She's emitting an aura as if it was 'the end of the world'. Grail could not hold it in and laughed.

"It's okay. I'm not angry."

When he said it in the softest voice possible, light of hope returned to Mil's eyes in the dark under the bed. To check that, she stared up while trembling.

"It was my fault for not closing the lid on the ink bottle."

If the lid was shut tightly, a baby fox wouldn't have been able to open it. Not with those clumsy paws.

He did not check the objects on top of the table because he thought that it would not be possible to climb.

"So now, come out."

Grail stretched his arm under the bed. He grabbed Mil, who was still hiding her front feet, by her nape and dragged her out. Mil was not coming out on her own, but she didn't resist either.

"Ah, they really are black. Plus, all four of them."

He laughed upon seeing her feet. Why was it that he did not feel angry or dumbfounded when she dirtied the room so much?

He patted Mil, who was making an expression strangely like a human's.

"It doesn't look like you have any wounds. Let's wash off the ink now."

When he spoke kindly, Mil, who was making a grim expression without saying a thing, suddenly cried *kyunkyun* and clung to Grail's feet. If it were to be translated, it would be "Wa~n, I'm sorryyy!" maybe. She was like a child pouring out tears because it felt relieved.

She cried as if she were begging for forgiveness, leaping with her hind legs and scratching Grail's trousers with her forelegs. That action was so lovely and it would have been a waste to stop it in the middle, so Grail gladly sacrificed his trousers. The ink on Mil's front feet were not dry yet.

Ah... I'm sorry.

I'm really sorry.

I was prepared to receive a scolding and be driven out of the fort, but the one-eyed knight was a kind man. Even though I soiled the room with ink, he didn't scold me, saying that it was his fault for not closing the ink lid. I even increased the damage when I was apologising before, dirtying his trousers, but he smiled softly as if he didn't care. How tolerant!

Furthermore, he's doing his best to wipe the ink off my feet, Even as he's saying, "This isn't coming off well." He's sitting cross-legged and is wiping off the ink from my feet with a wet cloth. From washing my feet in a bucket of lukewarm water, most of the ink came off, but my feet were still grey-coloured.

He was touching my sensitive belly, but I had no right to complain. The only right I was allowed now was for me to reflect and be thankful.

Thank you so much, and I'm really sorry. I wanted to convey that, so I persistently licked the one-eyed knight's hand. When I did that, he said, "Alright alright," and swiftly took his hand away. How unfortunate.

In the end, my four legs had light grey socks. The one-eyed knight said, "They will come off when you run around in the snow." I hope so. If they don't get erased, the evidence of my failure will remain for eternity.

After that, the one-eyed knight started cleaning his room. The books weren't dirtied that much, and he read a lot so he said that it's okay. That's a relief, but I'm still sorry.

The stain on the floor or the chair weren't completely erased, but he said that he'll just keep using them. I'm sorry.

As for the table, the ink seeped in deeply, and it was old to being with, so he said that he'll get rid of it. "I was planning on replacing it, so this is a good time," he said, but I'm sorry.

Then the important-looking documents are all scrapped. I'm sorry!

"I can always write the documents again."

The one-eyed knight is so kind that it hurts.

While he's cleaning, I couldn't help because I was a fox, just standing behind him quietly. To not get in his way, I just stayed still and quiet with a distressed expression, watching him work.

"..."

In front of me, the one-eyed knight was cleaning up the mess I made while I couldn't do anything. However, he did not hate this useless me, but rather he sometimes looked over here and smiled.

I wonder why?

After he finished cleaning my feet and his room, he squeezed out the water into a bucket full of dirty water and stretched his neck. It must have been tiring. I increased his workload. I couldn't help but feel overly self-conscious.

"The lunch break's almost over."

"...!"

S-Sorry, I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I made you clean in your precious break time.

I circled around the one-eyed knight.

However, the one-eyed knight did not seem to care a bit about wasting the break time. He picked up the bucket, looked down at me with a benign expression and said something jokingly.

"Now, we'll go greet the Branch Captain. He's the highest ranked person in this fort, so don't bite him."

...Mn? Mr Branch Captain?

After putting away the bucket, the one-eyed knight and I went to the Branch Captain. I put all my effort into climbing the steps, and proceeded down the quiet hallway. Here, the atmosphere feels somewhat different. Unlike the rowdy dining hall or the comfortable quarters, I could feel the air getting tense here. I straightened my back and stuck close to the one-eyed knight.

Branch ‘Captain’, he said, so is he higher ranked than the one-eyed knight, the ‘Vice’-Captain? Before, he said “the highest ranked person in this fort”.

Just front thinking about meeting him, my steps became wonky from nervousness. I have four feet, so I’m confused about which one I have to move first...

If the Branch Captain does not give me permission, I wonder if I can’t stay here.

If he’s the one-eyed knight’s superior, I wonder if he’s older and stronger and tougher.

In my head, I imagined a large and strong man like a bear. It’s the man in charge of this fort in this harsh environment, after all. He’ll need to be someone like that to be here.

We stopped in front of a large wooden door. Maybe it’s the office of the Branch Captain. Then, the one-eyed knight suddenly knocked without a sign. Wait, I’m not ready for this yet...! I tried to fix my hair fringe, but I realised that I did not have hair.

While I was just realising such a trivial thing, an answer came from inside and the one-eyed knight opened the door.

I gathered up courage to face the bear in power and entered the wide room. Though I hid under the one-eyed knight’s legs.

I felt a sense of disharmony the moment I entered, from the smell. I do understand that the smell of burning wood from the stove would be strong, but there was also the clean smell of soap. In this fort full of men, only Tina has that kind of smell. What is this refreshing smell.

The room did not have anything unusual. There were bookshelves and filing cabinets by the wall, a classy low table in the middle along with a black sofa that went well with that, and an office desk by the window. Also, the floor was carpeted and soft, good for my paws.

“Thank you for the work today, Branch Captain.”

The one-eyed knight greeted the Branch Captain while standing at the entrance. His voice was lower, more polite and calmer than when he speaks to me. From that, I also looked toward the desk. The moment I saw the Branch Captain, the image of a bearish old man received a punch and disappeared. The Branch Captain was the opposite of my imagination.

The person sitting on the desk was a handsome man that deep black hair that reached down to his shoulders. In his small face, his long eyes, his handsome eyebrows, his thin nose and lips were arranged perfectly. He didn't have the breathtaking beauty of Mother, but he had a gender neutral beauty to him.



And he was younger than expected. He looked like he was a little younger than the one-eyed knight even.

Compared to the rough knights in the fort, he was much thinner and much more elegant. However, he seemed to have been training, as he did not have a soft feeling to mistake him as a girl.

He gave an impression that he is a strict and cold superior.

"Today, I am here to talk about the baby fox I mentioned sometime ago. May I have permission to protect her in the fort? I brought the fox in question over as well."

"...What?"

Upon hearing the one-eyed knight's words, Mr Branch Captain lifted an eyebrow. He doesn't seem to like me coming that much.

Mr Branch Captain slowly turned his gaze to me, who was hiding under the one-eyed knight's legs.

It was as if I was being pierced by those pitch black eyes, that my heart pounded like crazy from nervousness.

However, I have confidence in my looks. To be frank, I am a bit cute.

...Yes, I'm sorry.

Still! Seeing this fluffy white me, no one would think, 'Uwaa, how ugly' or 'biologically impossible'. Though Mr Branch Captain may be a cold person, I don't think he'll say "I won't give permission. Throw it out," to this poor little fox.

I am a poor baby fox. Mother went to the Capital, so I have nowhere to go to. I am careless and pour ink all over the place (mental scar), but I am a good kid. I get excited over fresh snow and lose myself, but I fundamentally am a good kid. Please let me stay!

I pleaded Mr Branch Captain with my eyes while thinking that.

When his gaze met mine, he sharply raised his eyes for a blink. I'm not exaggerating, just for a blink. In those eyes, there were other emotions than coldness, but I couldn't read what they were.

His reaction afterwards was what was important for me.

Mr Branch Captain closed his eyes, frowned greatly, clenched his teeth and grimaced.

Eh? I was scowled at...? Was it biologically impossible?

However, that expression lasted only for a moment, and returned to a calm expression. As if nothing happened — as if he did not see me — he turned to the one-eyed knight.

“That?”

Icy cold voice. ‘That’ must mean me.

Oh no, he might hate me. I looked up at the one-eyed knight out of anxiety, but his expression was as usual...

“Yes, isn’t it cute?”

He lips curled into a smile slightly as he said that softly. How is he being so carefree in front of this icy Branch Captain?

Mr Branch Captain ignored that and delivered his decision in a composed tone.

“...It’s not bad to interact with animals. It can help with restoring vigour to my subordinates who are tired from the harsh life and work here. However, if discipline falls from that, and there are troubles with work or missions, it needs to be reconsidered. That is all.”

He said that in a businesslike manner, but he did not deny my existence. Rather, it was a normal and rational opinion. From that reaction when he saw me, I thought he was going to say, “What do you mean protection, get that beast away!”

Moreover, from what he just said, I also understood that he was thinking of his subordinates properly.

How unexpected.

“Then, will you give permission for protection?”

“If you, Grail, will take care of the baby fox, I will not interfere.”

"There won't be a problem. Thank you."

It seems like permission was given. It seems like Mr Branch Captain doesn't like me very much, but I didn't dislike him.

I felt that he was a person that could make fair judgements as the person in charge of this fort.

"Then, please excuse me."

"...Yeah."

I chased after the one-eyed knight into the hallway. It would be scary to be glared at again, so I did not look back.

It was good that permission was given, but I think I have to change the impression I have on myself. *Would there really be someone who dislikes a little frail baby fox?* What had I been thinking. How self-conscious.

There are people that dislike animals, and there are also people indifferent to animals. The one-eyed knight is kind, Tina keeps saying 'cute', and the other knights did not dislike me either, so I ended up getting a little too full of my self. I must reflect.

'I might be a healing kind...' I feel embarrassed for thinking that for even a moment. Very embarrassing. I want to hit myself. What do you mean, healing kind, you furball!

Yes. I'm just a furball. I do have knowledge from my previous life, but I'm not using it, and I don't even have special powers as a spirit. I can't earn money, I can't hunt, I don't have the strength protect someone, I don't know anything, I spill ink (mental scar)...

Huh? I'm more helpless than I thought I was.

Chapter 14

Expanding Friendship

“You wouldn’t want to watch over the room all day would you?”

Well, I don’t want to but if he asked me nicely, I would do it. Because I am a good child, I’ll watch over the room for him. I didn’t want to accidentally knock things over and break them so I’ll stay on the bed where I can’t break anything. That’d be boring though; I’m already drowsy. The one-eyed knight looked at me with intrigue while a laugh leaked out through his grin. Why is he laughing?

“You’re very easy to understand. Your tail dropped the moment I mentioned you watching the room.”

I would definitely say if I was human my face would be red as a tomato with embarrassment. I can’t help that my tail is honest to my emotions, definitely cannot help it.

Now it’s hanging listlessly...

“Do you want to go play outside? We can’t keep you locked up in here all the time, hmm. You know why don’t we practice hunting?”

Well if he asked me to watch over the room, I wouldn’t say no because I’m a good child and I can follow directions properly. Certainly, there isn’t anything for me to play within the room, but I can definitely say I can live without hunting.]

“But you’ll have to watch out for wild dogs, they’re most active just after the sun goes down. I wouldn’t worry too much during the day since there are guards training just outside the gates so you can run to them for help.”

“Well if Mill was human I wouldn’t have a problem staying in the room even if it was cramped but you aren’t. You are a newborn and you’re going to return to the wild eventually. It’s best if you knew what dangers lurked in the outside world so I guess I can’t let you stay in the room forever...”

If I was a common household pet like a dog or cat would you keep me safely in the room? Truly I'm a delicate fox! I nuzzle my head into his palm, urging him to pet me. Pat more, please. I know I need to keep my distance but I'm grateful to him. I know if I keep this up I won't be able to part with him and leaving would be heartbreak.

Mother, I know I came down the mountain to find you, but I don't think I'll be able to leave here now. I've complete trust in this man. The love I have for this place now amounts more than the snowflakes falling. I'm sorry.

By the way, next is jerky~!

I've been wondering how long until the mother returns back to the mountain. I can't speak the human's language and if I can't speak, how will I say goodbye to this man? To the other knights? They all will be worried. The one-eyed knight more so than the others. If I had suddenly disappeared, he'd definitely go looking for me.

With all these depressing thoughts, I felt my mood quickly fall.

* * *

Snow~!

"I will be back for you just before the sun sets."

Like a nagging mother the one-eyed knight had placed me down in the corner of the training grounds, which was empty, with words such as "Don't leave the training area." or "Don't go anywhere dangerous." and "Stay away from the pond." Seriously, maybe my mother was a father and this man was actually my mother. *[Ashes: added this line myself poking how Mother threw mill down a cliff]*

All of it just went in one ear and out the other. With the whole training field to myself, I ran around the entire training field excited. If someone had seen the earlier dejected me, they would have thought I was playing with the man.

Certainly, I thought of myself as a human in the body of a fox but seeing myself now playing in the snow with such content, I don't think it mattered anymore. My heart is that of a young snow-loving spirit now. Running around I was thinking how well I could keep turning at this speed. Definitely, if I were to slip I'd run straight into the snow piles on the edges of the field but since the snow was soft it still would be fun

unless you hit a with ice.

Ironically I found myself pulled from my thoughts as I began to slide uncontrollably into the snow pile due to losing focus in a Poof~, awakening the human side in me again. I emerged covered in snow. Heavy. I shook my body causing most of the snow to fall off, however clumps of stubborn snow hug from my beautiful fluff. Regardless I started walking again but the snow that clung to me became even heavier as it picked up more snow, turning the clumps into snowballs [*].

Frustrated, I shook myself trying to take it off, but I couldn't; not with these short limbs. Not even my mouth could reach it.

What the heck! These snowballs! I am a spirit of the snow, get off me!

While struggling all alone in the snow, there was the sound of crunching snow approaching from a distance. I looked up in a hurry and saw two knights stopping a small distance from me. They laughed as they watched I attempted to remove the snowballs from my fur. Seeing the gate behind them in the distance, they probably were its guards.

"Can't get it off, can yeah?"

One of them crouched down and gestured to come over to him, but it was a stranger so I was quite intimidated. Then again I wanted these pesky snowballs off me. At this rate, if I continued to play they would probably keep growing until I couldn't walk anymore, turning me into a literal "Snow-Fox". Patiently, the two knights waited for me to come closer. Neither tried to move, probably thinking that I would run if they did.

I nervously approached them. I felt scared as this was the first time I approached someone other than the one-eyed knight. When I was close enough, I sniffed the crouched knight, but I felt he didn't mean me any harm.

Un, no dangerous smells.

He was okay. I felt my heart pounding in my chest as I used my eyes to convey my desire to the knight "Please take it off"

"Oh! It really came! Did you get used to people because of the Deputy Manager?"

The Knights were pleasantly surprised that I had approached them willingly and one

by one, the crouched Knight crushed and removed the clinging snowballs from my fur with his gloved hands.

"Ahh. This is nostalgic. I use to have a dog growing up with long fur as well. Every winter I would have to do help him remove snow from his coat as well."

One by one the snowballs were removed and when the last one was taken care of, I quickly distanced myself from him. I was terrified as my heart was racing, but I was thankful since my body felt lighter. My tail expressed that by wagging happily unhindered by snow.

"I'm here until dusk today. If you need anything just come and find me, I'll help if I can."

He pointed to the gates behind him as he got up and together they both walked back to them.

Ah, thank you Aniki, You are too kind!

Eventually that day, I came to be indebted to that Aniki twice because...

Another snowball decided to grow on me...

As the sun began to set, the one came around to get me. I was waiting at the spot he had left me earlier.

"Did you enjoy yourself?"

He let out a light laughter as I nodded my head while panting "uh-huh!". I enjoyed playing in the snow after being stuck in the room all morning. I realized how much I loved the snow. Before when I was human I had always avoided going out in winter whenever I could and because I was always surrounded by snow up in the mountain; it was something that I took as a given.

I love snow, I love running around in the snow.

I wasn't uncomfortable due to my fur.

"Outside is good after all."

There was a ting of lonely

>>Unedited Below<<

There was a hint of loneliness when he spoke, I tried to play with his boot's strings to cheer him up. He rubbed my head.

" Trying cause mischief?"

No! I'm trying to comfort you!

In fact I thought of licking his hand, but I can't reach. I repeat, my mouth can't reach. When I released his boot string, he petted me again. Un, I'll be good next time because the warmth of his hand is wonderful. It's a feeling I didn't wish would go away.

It didn't last long as his hand left my head.

" Let's go get our meals."



The dining hall was stressful even tho he brought me before the busiest time there was a lot of people there.

There, the dining room was a place of ordeal.

It seems that they brought me a little earlier than the most crowded time, but still more people are in the morning than in the morning. I kept up with the one-eyed knight as we made out way to get food, muttering to my self

" I feel scared..."

After being served, the one-eyed knight took both our servings in both his hands and sat in the corner of the hall. Same as in the morning... I wonder if this is his own special seat...

Today's menu was soup with finely chopped vegetables, some bite-sized meat and a half cooked egg in the broth. My eyes shined as I saw the eggs rather than when I saw the meat. Went I bite into the egg, the rich-yellow yolk flowed into my mouth.

“Oi, so it was Mill-chan after all!”

The person who called out was Ms. Tina from this morning who walked over as I was enjoying my egg. I am okay with Ms. Tina, but the other knight with her I was weak against... Because it was a child... I felt a tense when the boy looked at me with a curious gleem. I felt it, my instincts set off alarms remembering the children I had encountered on the way here!

” You are the same Mill as before aren’t you?!”

The boy suddenly ran up and lifted me in the air, my body stiffening due to fear as he lifted me high in the air.

Giya~! High!

Scary!

My instincts were right after all! This person is definitely dangerous! The danger of the innocence of a “Child’s heart”!

“Kix!”

Ms. Tina hurried and made him put me down. I plopped onto the floor, my legs trembling so much I couldn’t stand up. It was scarier than a roller coaster I rode in my previous life. Knix is the name of this dangerous child? I’ll remember it. While dazed, I heard a heavy sound next to me.

“Ooouch! Whhaa! that hurt!”

Kix turned to face the One-eyed knight who dropped his fist on his head, staring with tears in his eyes. You dropped the fist on him? It looked like the one-eyed knight’s first was as hard as a rock. That must have hurt a lot... After the one-eyed knight finished punishing the child , he sat back and gently stroked my head soothingly.

When the knight of the eyes finished sanctions of Tekken says silently,

I sat back on my seat after gently stroking my head.

“Idiot!”

Knix turned towards Ms. Tina surprised.

" What are you doing Knix!?"

Then the spectators began to gather, About 5 to 6 of them. looking at them my face turns blue beneath my fur because they are all scary looking knights. people with shaved heads and bears, a very scary face! Ah! Some of them look like the ones that helped me yesterday!

They all greet the one-eyed knight , with him acknowledging. Although it was rude of me to think, it reminded me of Yakuza henchmen greeting the head of a family. They all turned towards me. Their smiles are definitely scary...

" Are you okay?

They say hello to the knight of the eyetrain "thank you " – although it is rude,

The yakuza people seemed to be drawing the head down to the young head -,

I turned my face towards me.

Stable smile is scary.

"Are you okay?"

"Are you feeling sick?"

"Oi, Did that fool Kix bully you?"

Even though they're speaking softly to me, my mind keeps saying " Scary!" when I look at their appearance

" Do you remember me from yesterday?"

One person with a beat pointed to himself. Of course I remember, however being surrounded by such scary looking knights my knees tremble against my will. Even though I believe judging people by their appearances is useless, my tail still hide between my legs.

"Oi, aren't don't you look scared?"

“This is because your face is terrifying!”

“Hey! Even you’re saying it?!”

Stop.

Don’t yell! you’re just making my tail disappear under me more and more!

“All of you are troublesome.”

The one-eyed knight kept eating without paying much mind to the knights, but still sounded a little irritated. I tried to calm myself like him but couldn’t. The knights lowered their heads in reflection while talking softly.

“But even it’s terrified of us here... Ah that reminds me...”

“I just wanted to stroke its soft-looking fur...”

There were a few other comments, but all of these scary knights were murmuring in soft pain-stricken tones that my conscience was taking one hit after another. Of course I remember them helping the other day with the wild dog however, because I cannot speak, I cannot tell them how thankful I am to them. I wanted to tell them that even tho I was trembling, I didn’t dislike them, but even appreciate them.

Such times, me not being able to speak was painful.

“I’m already accustomed to scaring women and children but it’s always a sin that even animals are frightened by my face...”

“I hate that my parents gave birth to such a face...”

The scary knights began to murmur with such heart breaking tones that other knights around them tried to comfort them.

Kix still was holding his head in pain from the one-eyed knight’s first still.

“we are like this for the rest of our lives, even protecting a lost child in town we get mistaken as kidnappers...”

” I even wore knight clothes...”

"Even when I help a woman and try to flirt, I get taken as a hoodlum..."

"Even while wearing knight clothes..."

The one-eyed knight silently kept eating next to me, the other knights' sad confessions had my full heartfelt sympathy, tears welled up in the corners of my eyes. I cannot expression my feelings in words... but I can show it in a different way!!

I grabbed my piece of meat and called them with all the courage I could muster up and approached these men who could be mistaken as bandits. When they noticed, they were surprised but their gazes caused me to hold my breath. All right all right!

Their face was one thing but it was apparent that their personality was different; they're wonderful people. Using this to persuade myself, I fought off my animal instincts that screamed "Scary!!" and held my ground without escaping.

I put my piece of meat down and pushed it with my nose towards them. I used my eyes to tell them I was offering it to the ones who were murmuring sadly. The knights had expressions of surprise from it.

"Oi, isn't this your dinner? You're... giving it... to us?"

"You... Weren't you scared of us...?"

"Certainly you were trying to avoid us..."

"Wait... You so you do remember yesterday! So this meat is suppose to be your thanks!"

"Yes! Yesterday's reward! Well it was actually the Deputy Chief who jumped into the water and helped us. We didn't do anything that you'd need to thank us for!"

Its fine, its fine. When I was surrounded by the dogs in the pond, I was glad you all came to help me. This meat is small, but please share it with everyone. I am truly thankful for what was done for me.

"Ho ho ! I'm certainly happy to receive you gratitude!"

" Haha! I feel tears are coming!"

"Even other didn't give us rewards when we were kind to them..."

These bandit like knights were filled with fears because of such a small piece of meat I gave them. I see... They live a hard life. After that with one-eyed knight I gave a piece of meat to Ms Tina as well. They're all happy over the gesture.

I hope this conveyed my gratitude properly.

By the way,

Knix is still holding his head, looking wronged.

Chapter 15

Free Time In The Common Area

I am weak to heat it seems. So what do I do? keep far away from it.

I scowled at the flames that danced in the fireplace that was built in the corner of the lounge while thinking such things. The knights whom finished their dinners gathered in the lounge that was attached to the dormitory to enjoy their little leisure time before going to into dreamland. Nevertheless, they aren't the main focus of today as they're normally delving into books, playing card games or telling obviously tall-tales of themselves. That reason would be...

Because I'm here!

Just so you know, I'm not being egotistical. I'm thinking truthfully because everyone has been paying attention to me every moment as if they're hawks watching their prey. With every move I make, their eyes follow me. Well, I guess if there's an animal in the room you'd pay some attention to it, more so if you weren't accustomed to it.

After the meal, the one-eyed knight had planned on taking me back to the room but Tina, Knix, and the other scary Knights protested. I guess they hadn't had their fill of fluff yet and wanted a little more, which was fine with me. Everyone is dead tired from their duties today, I guess they're thinking along the lines such as " Getting heal by watching the fluffy animal." or something. Their hearts are in the right place.

I nodded to the one-eyed knight my approval, so he put me down and decided to take a bath. He left some parting words about being careful, he left the common area. Because of the ink incident, I've found that he's worried about leaving me alone. His concern seems to be more about me getting injured rather than things being broken.

There were plenty of knights in the common area, but none were in armor. They all wore casual outfits while relaxing. Un, it seems that their scariness halves when they're out of armor.

Tina and Knix were in the room along with other familiar faces such as the knights I had seen at lunch and the Aniki who took those pesky snowballs out of my fur. The

people on the sofa were ones I've only seen while passing by in the corridors and the ones by the fireplace were ones I'd see at breakfast. I thought a fort would have hundreds of people but it appears to be less to the point I probably remember everyone's faces after a while.

By the way, it seems that the bath here in the fort is a large communal bath connected to the lodgings. I wonder if Tina enters alone after everyone has gone or does she get a special timing? In a modern sense*, it's natural to take a bath or shower every day, but it seems the knights don't. I would assume it's because of the cold. It's probably okay if they only shower on days they get sweaty, maybe like when they train?

Even with that, the one-eyed knight drew hot water after training this morning and wiped his body in the room. It seems he views it as troublesome to even the bath every day. After listening to the knights' conversation, it appears the hot water in the bath is similar to a hot-spring. However, there seems to be a strange smell in there like a "Rotten Egg". I wasn't interested in hot springs in my previous life so I really don't understand if that's good or bad.

"Paw"

A palm was suddenly thrust in front of me while I was in my thoughts. It was Knix. If he was wanting me to place my paw in his hand, I can do it; but I refuse.

"Paw!"

That arrogant face.

It seems Knix doesn't understand much about wild animals. If it was trained animal they would certainly do as ordered, but I'm a young fox who isn't accustomed to human beings without any training. Suddenly coming up to me and saying "Paw" while holding your hand in my face is being unreasonable.

I just ignore him as he scratched his head with his free hand.

" Is it no use...?"

No, it's unreasonable. I will not do. Refused. Declined. It's strange.

People around Knix start lecturing him

“If you don’t train an animal, it won’t do as ordered”

“But I thought I could do it!”

Knix refuted while a vein appeared on his forehead.

“Yeah yeah, it seems stupid.”

While my opinion of Knix is certainly improving, his behavior still is intolerable. Like now, as he reached out and tried to grab me, so I fled in a hurry.

“Hey! Don’t run from me!”

“Knix! Haven’t you learned your lesson?! If you try to be so forceful, she’ll only hate you.

Tina’s face expressed her displeasure.

“Really? I’ve never had dogs or anything. I don’t know how to handle one, but I’ve been wanting a dog for a long time...”

His eyes shined as he looked at me. No. I. Am. Not. A. Dog. Ah, I’m troubled by this child. Even if you’ve had such a desire for a long time, it’s a heavy thing for me. For the time being though, Knix seems to have quieted down after hearing Tina’s advice. I was able to relax now and wondered the room at my leisure.

Whilst avoiding the area near the fireplace, I sniffed around the floor. I could smell many people. I caught the scent of the one-eyed knight and followed the trail that lead to a closed door. My tail started to sway uncontrollably, Nah? He still in the bath. I felt the curious gazes of the other knights so I continued to sniff around along the wall from the door. It was fun since you could get various information from the scents.

Oi, what is this? It seems like the smell of another animal?

After I smelled the scent of another animal my tail tensed up. Was there another animal besides me here?

Oh, what is this smell?

It looks like the smell of a beast,

It is said to be a bit dusty.....

I found a small hole slightly further ahead of me, just at the bottom of the wall. The order that worried me was coming from it. Curiosity got the best of me so my nose slowly slid towards it as I tried to pick up more of the scent. When I got close I tried to put my nose in it and the next moment –

“*****?!?!?!” [TLNote: Fox curse words...]

I let out a loud yelp as I flew backward with momentum, my body swelled as my fur bristled from fear.

“Oi! What’s wrong ?”

Startled, Knix called out from behind me with concern. I hear him, but I couldn’t pay attention to him at the moment. From the dark hole in front of me...

“Oh no! Rats!!”

Tina cried as a brown mouse crawled out from the hole in the while, a small “Chutchu” coming from its mouth.

“What? Is it a mouse?”

The scary knights were very calm, only Tina and I were in fear of our very lives. Were they used to this? The mouse seemed pretty aggressive and unexpectedly came out in a brightly lit room with a lot of people watching it. It was bigger than the mice I’ve seen in Japan and seems to be a strong one.

It bared its teeth and cried out its complaint of me shoving my nose in it’s home briefly before retiring back into the house after having vented.

(.....)

I shuddered with a gulp and quickly turned heel; retreating from the wall. Mouse is scary, yes.

“I must block that hole...”

Meanwhile, with a blue face, Tina uttered with absolute determination. Behind them, the men leaned close together and began discussing something

“Do foxes eat rats?”

“Not sure... Maybe.”

“Mill was pretty scared there though...”

“Mill flew back, what the hell!?”

“I guess she was surprised, but to fly like that...”

When one broke out in laughter, everyone else began to laugh as well. My cheeks turned red with embarrassment.

Kaaaaaa!!! Don’t laugh at me!

In a huff of frustration, I bit onto Knix’s pants at the hem and pulled on it to vent.

“Oi! What is it? Did you get embarrassed?”

Even tho I pulled on his pants in anger, Knix looked pretty ecstatic, the tone in his voice was that of happiness.

“Hey, I guess Mill is smart! Pretty shameless!”

“Hey, I guess Mill is clever, I feel shameless”

“Is that so, it’s good that she’s lively.”

“Mill doesn’t seem so shy now that she is mad!”

she huffed, even more, thinking ” I’ll remember this!”

The laughter that had died down now roared to life.

Waaaaa! Stop! Forget it already!!!

I started barking at all of them, my cheeks burning hotter in protest.

“Stop causing trouble.”

The new voice that called out into the room was like a bucket of ice water over the festive mood, cooling all the excitement. The voice that wasn’t loud at all, but firm; was heard perfectly by all of us. The entire room became quiet.

Looking around for the owner of the voice, I saw the door leading into the corridor open and standing in the doorway was a handsome man with black hair belonging to...

The Chief commander.

His frown conveyed his displeasure with us as he looked over all of his men carefully.

“It’s good to enjoy your free time, but don’t get too loud.”

After the stern advice was stated, he looked at me with a glare and quietly closed the door with a grumpy expression.

...Did I just get scolded...?

The whole room remained an eerie quiet until the footsteps of the chief couldn’t be heard as he walked down the corridor couldn’t be heard anymore. I also kept quiet while holding my breath. Eventually, one knight blinked and let out a sigh.

“Man, I was scared. Chief truly is scary.”

In contrast, the scary bearded knight became calm again.

“Well, it was starting to get too loud. Some of the other should already be sleeping.”

“I think you should go and apologize to the Chief. He looked quite angry.”

“He couldn’t be that angry... Right...?”

The bearded turned to the knight next to him that appeared to be around the same age and told him something. The other knights around them looked serious and nodded with understanding.

“Rather than anger, maybe it was envy right?”

One of the knights nodded in agreement, while some mutter "Yes, yes.". Some of the younger knights and Tina only tilted their heads in confusion. I too tilted my head in confusion. Perhaps the Chief didn't have any friends? Is that what they're making a fuss about? I felt sympathy towards him as I thought "Let me show you kindness next time chief"

"Envy? What does the Chief have to envy about us?"

Rumor? Does it go along the lines of him not having friends?

"Oi, what's this about a rumor?"

"That the Chief -"

"Mill, I'm back."

The one-eyed knight returned back to the Common room and picked me up before I could hear the rest of this very important rumor.

No, I already figured it out.

Someone should go befriend the Chief!

Chapter 16

Mr Branch Captain's Secret Face

The second day of living with the one-eyed knight, I slowly getting accustomed to various aspects of one-eyed knight's days. For example, how he trains first thing in the morning.

Because of the problems with Knix from the yesterday, I'm on alert for Knix. I still won't let anyone stroke me since my stomach, paws, tail are delicate; Tina is an exception though. Even if you speak kindly and reach our your head, it's no good.

While eating breakfast in the dining room, Tina took the liberty of stroking my fur while loudly "Kyaaa~!" ing. Also "No way you're this fluffy! Must be a lie!" Do you not like it? As for the one-eyed knight, he left for work. On his way, he let me out into the training yard to play around again. He told me to be a "Good Girl" before stroking me and leaving.

Unlike yesterday, there were knights in the training yard today. Today they were training, running laps in the snow while carrying their equipment. So I decided to play on the edge of the yard so I could stay out of their way. Sadly, as I was digging, I found that the dirt on the edge was hard and not very fun to dig it up.

After I finished digging a hole, I took a break to catch my breath. I still had a lot of energy after digging tho, so I walked to another spot to continue digging. However, due to my carelessness, I slipped and slid into the hole I just dug. Ugh!

After regaining my senses, I crawled out of the hole quickly while lamenting on my carelessness. Hopefully, nobody saw. The knights that were training in the yard had just sat for a break, their heavy breaths coming out as mists as they laughed. They were laughing hard.

"It's quite a spot you got!"

"Even I am out of breath from running, I can still laugh!"

I was seen!

I left the training yard with haste as my face burned with embarrassment. Un, it's bad to distract them and disturb their training. After that predicament, I went to the stables and watched from afar as the people who appeared to be the caretakers feed the horses. There was an uncle who noticed me watching and asked if I wanted some. I declined. Even though I'm omnivorous, I rather not.

When the caretakers were finished with their duties had left, I approached the horses and gave a greeting to each of them. All of them responded with a exhale of white breath. I approached the big horse that was towards the middle of the stables and greeted in the same fashion. I wasn't familiar with the horse, but its coat was a dark-brown, but with the light of today it appeared almost black.

The dark horse's muscles were well defined, his face was daunting and gave off a dependable feeling. It appeared that the other horses looked to it as it's leader. His long and black tail swayed lightly as he stretched his head down to me. I believe this is the one-eyed horse as a little of his scent remained. Their auras were alike as well. So this horse was by his side. I could feel a calmness knowing that.

The horses seem to also know I was almost attacked by a dog. Were you listening to what the knights were talking about or did you see it?

"Are you okay?" Even though the horses couldn't speak, their feelings of worry were conveyed to me. I'm okay. It let out a loud neigh as if saying "I'll scare it off next time". You don't look like a weak animal, leader. I'll count on you then.

I also give a polite greeting to the horse next to the black horse. Greetings were also important in the animal hierarchy. This horse had a glossy black coat. It was so beautiful that I felt like sighing in spite of myself. It had a calm temperament that gave off a delicate feeling.

"A dog resembles its master."

Though it was a domestic horse, it smelled of the Chief, I could see their personalities matching. There wasn't anything bad about the smell, it was a soapy scent. Which as I thought of it, I could smell it on the wind. The black horse in front of me shook its tail with happiness and when I turned around, I saw the Chief walking through the snow towards the stable.

Ah, his black hair flowed in the wind. It's enviable to me who use to be a former human

girl. There didn't seem to be any hair treatment in this world. How do you take care of your hair?

"..."

After the Chief got close enough to the stables, he seemed to have noticed I was here. I guess my fur blended really well with the snow. It's a protective color, yes. He stopped as he squinted his eyes. The black horse impatiently called out to him after noticing him coming over. This caused the chief to come over to the horse

I wonder what is wrong, he seems to be a little different? Hey, look at your horse, nothing down here.

"Hey, Iraux. How you?"

Then while he ignored my existence, he caressed the horses face with a little nervousness. I decided I wasn't going to disturb them so I quietly moved over to the one-eyed knight's horse. While the Chief spoke weirdly to his horse while patting it while talking "How's your body?" and "Have they given you good food?"

People who talk to animals aren't bad people. I thought this as I watch and thought maybe that maybe he was just a little misunderstood. He was completely different from usual. However, if my prediction is right that you don't have friends; this sight becomes sad.

That your horse is your only friend.

I cried in my heart for him.

The Chief was seriously misunderstood. Having such a cold outward image would certainly make it hard to make friends.

I'm rooting for you Chief, hang in there and good luck~!

I squeaked my support as I stepped on his boots.

(..... !)

The chief looked down with a confused look as he stiffened up. I guess he wasn't good with strangers touching him regardless if they were an animal or a human... Of did he dislike me? Did he have something against foxes? I looked at the reaction of his body before I looked up at his face.

Then this the part between his brows wrinkled up as he put his forehead against the horse. muttering something about it being hard. Whelp, I think I'm misunderstanding him. It must be hard on him not having friends. My concern for him is growing by the second. I stood up on my hind legs while placing my front paws on his leg while squeaking up at him again.

I will definitely become friends with the chief!

There is no retreat, I will do it. I'm not human, but having a spirit as a friend is pretty cool right? No? Am I disgusting to you?

The Chief finally looked at raised his face from the horse's and finally looked down at me with a pained expression as he looked at me clinging to him. I watched him close his eyes. "It's impossible..." He whispers to himself was barely heard by me as he couched down and scooped me up in a hug.

...huh?

I was caught up in his arm before he lowered me back down and started to pet me all over, sparing no part as he stroked me intently with a very ecstatic expression on his face. Ear to ear, back to the tail, and even my chest. Un, it's good.

His eyes became watery with erratic breathing with an "Ahh..." occasionally escaping his lips with a very sexy voice. I felt somewhat confused, where was our cool Ice Chief gone...?

I lifted one of my paws. Time for you to feel my ultimate move.

Pet the paw.

"T-This feel...!"

Yes, yes. Indeed the softness of my paws is my pride. Certainly, they're impressive but I didn't think it'd have that strong of an impression on him.

First of all, I thought he disliked me then I thought he just didn't have interest... I wonder what caused such a change of attitude... or was it that he wanted to be my friend?

The look in his eyes was that of fascination.

"You're definitely cute. Why are you so adorable?!... Ahhh. Of course, I love that you're this cute. I don't mind..."

My impression of the Ice Chief instantly collapsed, even tho it was on its last legs. It toppled over dead. He looked like a happy DereDere while he stroked Iruax and me at the same time. I wonder if I had been a bad person in my other life that I seem to only attract friends like the Chief who had such personalities towards animals. Maybe I was a bully, but certainly, this may have been a little overboard.

Then again, I don't hate being touched on my paws, rather I return the gesture by licking the back of his hand.

"Ahhh... I'm so happy that it hurts!"

The Chief looks like he checked out mentally as he turned his hand to his chest with a blissful expression as he murmured " So happy..." to himself. Though it was a small touch. I was wondering how I should look at the Chief from now that I've seen this side of him.

With sympathy towards him, I licked his pinky finger.

Chapter 17

Cromwell

The bell sounded out, telling everyone that it was time to take their lunch break. Grayle was the first one to leave the training ground after putting away his training equipment. He hadn't spotted the white fox that was playing around the field earlier but found little small pawprints in the snow leading away to the stables. Following the paw trail, Grayile regretted his decision the moment he got there. In the stables were not only the horses and the white fox there...

But also Chief Cromwell, who was playing around with the white fox with a large smile on his face.

"Why are you licking so much?"

Because of Chief Cromwell's constant cold and calm appearance, everyone started calling him the "Ice Chief" by the other knights, but right now, that cold facade he had melted into flowers as he played with the white fox. He expressed his happiness with the white fox licking his hand. This translation is hosted at AshenFeather.wordpress.com. With how intently the fox was licking his hand, he thought maybe he put honey on his hand. Cromwell who would normally have an anxious look towards animals was all smiles, but he didn't like the other knight's seeing this side of him.

Grayle sighed in his head and tried to slip away, but the Mill noticed him before he could. When she recognized him, she let out a bark with her tail swaying with delight as her shining eyes looked at him. However, Cromwell looked up to see why she was acting that way and immediately froze.

"I didn't see."

"..."

"..."

A sense of urgency arose between the two.

Both of them unsure of what to do and lost for words they stared awkwardly at each other, the sound coming from Mil's tail wagging. I hate people who read on aggregate sites, so go to my actual site and support the chapters with views. Those rumors among the knights that have been here longer being that the chief loved animals was quite popular.

The chief always came to the stables every day to talk with his beloved horse, brushing with care, or leaving fruits for the birds in winter so they don't starve. Also the stray cat with feeding it and giving it the name of "Nora". He also cried when that stray can was crippled. There was also the time when they were working and a white rabbit had run close by, his mask collapsed like a burning house as a smile would flash across his face.

Most of the members of the Northern Fort have more or less witnessed similar scenes of Cromwell losing his bearings around small animals. Strangely enough, Cromwell seemed to think that the knights here didn't love animals and kept it hidden, or tried to. This translation is hosted at AshenFeather. Grayle didn't dislike cute animals and thought it'd be nice to have one, but Cromwell took the attitude that he wasn't interested in animals desperately, so he pretended not to notice it either.

Grayle avoided eye contact with Cromwell, looking at the surroundings, avoiding dealing with the immediate situation.

Maybe he was scared of what the others would think of him if they saw that he really loved animals, that is probably why he looked annoyed and cold most of the time. Grayle thought this.

From Grayle's standpoint, as a commoner, he climbed to his position through his own ability. Not really having to worry about looks or likes, if you loved animals; you could freely admit to it without thinking, but Cromwell seemed to have a different idea about that. Cromwell was from a prestigious aristocratic family. Grayle wasn't sure he could be made chief as a commoner even with talent and achievement alone.

The person who promoted him didn't seem to care about it, but Cromwell seemed to care a bit too much about his appearance. Maybe he was scared that showing this side of him would forever change his image in the other knights' heads.

Cromwell grew up in the kingdom for a long time before coming to serve in this severe environment of the north. Maybe because of that, he wanted to look strong for the

other knights here already, so that he can have a good reputation.

Although there was less crime here on the northern border, there instead was a very real threat of the weather. There have even been cases where knights had frozen to death inside the forth. The environment here certainly was harsh with every day requiring them to remove snow from the forth while still training. All of it was a game of endurance.

Also including that most of the nights here were rejects from the other companies, those with bad habits and quirks that were seen as nuisances so no one but Cromwell was nobility; His family probably sent him here to gain confidence.

“Why not Gayle?”

Although as our leader, he has worked wonderfully at the Fort so far, I’m sure he’s far from having a good confidence yet. So to keep the act up, I won’t show that I’ve already been disillusioned. Allow him to think he’s still our “Ice Chief”, for such a hard working man, I’ll pretend I didn’t see anything.

“No, I was looking at Mill.”

“Mil? Is that the name you’ve given this little fox? This is a wild animal, you’ll become attached to it if you name it.”

Cromwell’s expression shows disinterest on purpose. He avoided looking down at it, probably so he wouldn’t give in to the temptation of the Mil’s cuteness.

“Did you come to see Iraux?”

“Yes. It is a knight’s responsibility to manage their mounts properly.”

Cromwell enunciated the “Properly” in his word. Meaning he didn’t come here because he was an advent animal lover, but because it was his duty to care for his horse. Grayle was strangely impressed at his denial skills.

“I’ll be going now...”

After stroking the nose of his horse gently, Cromwell attempted to leave. Even though he wished to have more “Healing time”, Gayle arrived so he could only endure. As he tried to leave though, Mill unexpectantly chased after him and began to chase after him.

“...!”

Gayle witnessed Cromwell's face shine for a moment after watching Mil, but he quickly changed his expression, his voice cold

“Stop being a burden and don't move around so much.”

Gayle watched Cromwell's brow wrinkle and to his surprise watched him reject Mil.

“Don't follow...”

Scratching Mil's nose, he turned around and headed back into the Fort while Mil tried to get his attention by chewing on his pants with a “Giriri”. It was obvious on his face that he was fighting the temptation to turn around, but he never did as he shook her off as he fled. It was quite sad actually.

“ You okay...? He's quite the fickle person isn't he?”

Gayle called out toward's Mill while joking and complaining in the same breath. Mil turned and came up to Gayle in a hurry. Gayle crouched down and stroked Mil's head while reminiscing about when Cromwell first came to the fort...

“Did you see the new Chief...?”

“Oh that noble's kid? I bet he only got it with his parent's power.”

“I can't stand people like that, it would have been better if the Deputy became the Chief.”

“He looks like a girl, no meat on him. How's he suppose to last the winter?”

At first, all of the knights despised Cromwell. From his appearance, it seemed like he was just a weak aristocrat trying to play hero but as they all began to work with him their perception of him began to change.

“Hey, today I had a match with the Chief for training, but damn; He's pretty strong. Not as strong as the Deputy, but he has a really sharp sword...”

“I watched, but he's definitely more than I expected. I thought he joined the knights through a connection so I only expected him to just swing randomly.”

"For a noble, he's pretty surprising."

"He's almost as scary as the deputy, don't you think?"

Grayle witnessed with a warm feeling that all the knight's that spoke horribly of Cromwell praise him one after another. Now that everyone in the fort recognized Cromwell, disregarding the icy mask he wears, he was full of information. Educating his own subordinates sternly. Of course, there are rumors that Cromwell was a closet animal lover, none of them belittled him because of it. Actually, the knights valued him much more than he thought and that aspect of loving animals was received quite favorably by the other knights.

While thinking back, Grayle smiled while stroking Mil's head.

Chapter 18

Panic

I wonder how many days have passed, but all I know is it's been a long time since I wandered into the fort that one day and so far, it's been filled with peace and fun. As of recent, I now stay in the same room as the one-eyed knight and today we awoke early. The one-eyed knight did his exercises before we both headed towards the Dining room.

After breakfast, the one-eyed dropped me off again then went on to do his daily duties. As always, it's exciting for me to get to play outside. I enjoy leaving pawprints in the fresh snow while running as fast as I can and digging holes in the snow. Then as you'd expect, playing in the snow, the dreaded snowballs clung to my body so I went to the gate to ask Brother Knight for help. The one that helped before.

In the opposite direction of the Lodgings and the gate, there is a garden with a fruit tree that attracts birds. I go there to look at the small birds that gathered to eat the fallen fruits and some of the ripe ones on the tree. So long as I don't get too close to them, they won't fly away. Even though they don't like me getting close, the little prints they leave in the snow are adorable; just watching them heal me.

After watching the birds, I go to the stables and greet all the horses. During that, Chief Cromwell came and I play with him. It seems I've become his close friend, I hope he makes a human friend soon among the knights. It seems the Chief comes out almost every day before noon, I hope he's getting his work done. Maybe he's taking an early break before coming here? By the way, when I play with the Chief I'm careful not to venture away from the stables since it looks like he's really accustomed to talking with others well. When I shook my tail and came over and touched his hand, the Chief suddenly had blood leak from his nose.

It was strange how a nosebleed could look so gorgeous if the person who had it was beautiful. Cromwell quickly held his nose to try and withhold the bleeding, but it was too late; I already saw, Cromwell holding his bloody nose while trembling. An excited expression plastered on his face while his horse looked at him with concern. After he was able to calm himself down, he took a luxurious handkerchief out of his pocket and

wiped his nosebleed; embarrassed while doing so.

"I'm okay, I'm okay... My heart just wasn't prepared..."

It was okay because he was beautiful with a nosebleed or rather because he's my friend. When noon rolled around, it was time for the Chief to go back, only it was obvious he was doing so reluctantly. The one-eyed knight also picks me up and I play with him while acting like a childish fox so he would give me jerky as snacks. I was happy.

In this world, I had only my mother, but now, it seems I've joined a big family here and to that; I'm quite happy. Thinking this I finished supper and headed to the common room to wait for a bath. While I waited I was brushed by Tina and played with knix... Sadly, Knix had only taken one bath in four days. Anyways, while in the common room, I have to be careful because even tho I've touched the Chief's animal-loving side because he'll get angry at us for being loud and reprimand us

Please, someone, be his friend...

On the note of baths, I was forced to enter the bath before.

It was on a day that the sun came out and the snow started to melt, so I had mud all over my fur. There was so much that even the other knights looked at me in awe. After that, I had been dragged to the bathhouse by the one-eyed knight. At first, I was excited... Then he took off his clothes in the dressing room, shocking me.

I was hoping he'd keep his underwear on, but no... Neither did the other knights who came to bathe. I also see the Chief here, keeping to himself and watching everyone. Certainly, he could try to be more social? I tried to escape from the dressing room so I wouldn't have to bathe with the guys.

Sadly, my escape was foiled.

The one-eyed knight caught me and only thought I hated baths. So while I was being bathed, I refused to open my eyes and everyone was laughing the whole time. How cruel, but I died before I could climb the stairs of adulthood so I'm a maiden on the inside. I believed if I looked I would be traumatized.

By the way, there was also a hot spring and I was interested, but I had to concede and accept the one-eyed knight's advice saying "It will be too hot for you". I also felt the aura of "Fire" from the hot springs, so it probably wouldn't be compatible to me who's a snow spirit. Rather, the hot spring itself was unusual as it's water was hotter than a regular hot spring so I couldn't bring myself to go in. When the one-eyed knight was finished, we both returned to the room and went to bed.

I liked that the one-eyed knight would pet my head while saying "goodnight" before we both went to sleep.

Like this, my days at the fort passed by peacefully. All the knight were gentle to me and no one bullied me, with wild dogs never showing up again, Everyday was fun, but then I remember, that mother should be back to the mountain soon...

If I don't return back to the mountaintop, I'll worry mother...

I suddenly thought of Mother who should be back soon, however, I couldn't just up and leave without saying anything. The one-eyed knight would certainly worry about me if I were to just disappeared. It's truly inconvenient that I can't speak. I can't express my gratitude or how much I love being here.

One afternoon I was wondering around the iron fence that surrounded the fortress. The spacing between the bars was enough that I could fit my small body through, just like how I got in. It was hard to say goodbye, especially to the one-eyed knight. Even though my mind screamed to go back home to mother, my legs wouldn't move forward. I wondered if my mother knew, would she let me come back and play. I sat in the snow, staring at the mountain. Slowly, it began to snow. Then the wind began to pick up and then it became terrible, almost blew me away. It was a snowstorm. The beautiful white snowscape turned into a white void and within a blink of an eye; it was a blizzard.

Thus giving me the excuse to push back leaving the fort thus I turned back and entered the fortress. But the snowstorm didn't stop for three days...

Chapter 19

Blizzard

In my previous life, the region I lived in was rather warm and snow would fall a few times during the winter, but it'd be so light that the snow would melt the moment it touched the ground. I used to see the images of the heavy snow areas on the Television when the news would show it and I used to think it was a problem. Well, on the other hand, it was also enviable when you're a child. If there was so much snow, you could make a snow-hut and even a slide.

But I can say now that this snowstorm had become dangerous. No matter how much snow they cleared, more would fall and quickly fill the cleared spots. Even on top of the mountain, there wasn't a snowstorm as severe as this on top of the mountain. I watched the storm from inside the one-eyed knight's room. Certain it was a terrible blizzard for the region...

On the second day, the window was plastered with snow. No light was able to come through and the room was dark like it was night still. For a moment I still thought it was night. The one-eyed knight tried to open the window to clean it, but it was sealed tight by the snow. The snowstorm continued with the same ferocity as the other day, the sky was covered with thick clouds, leaving the landscape gloomy and dark, but not as dark as inside.

Although I was excited that the snow had piled high, the one-eyed knight wasn't happy and didn't let me outside to play. All day the raging winds and snowfall continued without end, I even started to think that this was certainly strange. Storms on the mountain could go on for days, but it would fluctuate. Weakening here and there, even have gaps in between. This storm though, it showed no signs of stopping, even for a moment; the wind howled like it was angry as it battered the region. The weather was quite violent.

While I thought about things, another night passed in the snowstorm. I wondered how much the snow would accumulate while I was asleep. There was an uneasy feeling that gripped me as I laid down with the one-eyed knight to sleep. Though I closed my eyes, I ended up not being able to sleep due to the howling of the wind and it battering

the window, making it rattle violently.

As the third day arrived, the window to our room was still covered shut, but it wasn't just our window now that we couldn't open. The snow had piled so high that they engulfed all the windows on the first floor. Thankfully whether they anticipated such a thing happening or not, those windows were a lot smaller and sturdier than the upper floors.

Inside the dining hall, the main topic among the knights this morning was the storm. It was a given, as most of the knights were from different regions and this being their first time seeing such heavy snowfall. There was a running joke that it would be filling the entire fort, but it was a decent height so it wasn't a concern at the moment... Is what I want to believe but the dining hall's chef who is a local person said that there is a huge blizzard every couple of years, but it was unusual for it to get this bad. The mood in the dining hold was quite tense, to say the least...

So I thought since I was a snow spirit, I went to the roof of the fort and yelled at the sky like "Snow Stop!", but nothing happened. The storm continued to rage and ignored me. I even began to question my existence.

I'm a snow spirit, right?

As the morning continued, the knights continued clearing snow. Even though they cleared the paths, the snow would still quickly build up, but they still had to do it. Because move the snow was such a demanding job, the knights were shoveling in turns. They would dry their wet clothes by the fireplace while warming their hands and feet. I had been staying in the common room for a long time and I felt guilty that I couldn't stop this storm. So to try and make it up to them, I've been walking up to the tired knights who come in and let them touch my fur to their heart's content.

It seems that the one-eyed knight along with the Chief had been going to the nearby village to help with snow removal on the roads and roofs. It seemed to where trying to say as many homes as they could as a lot of them were old and less resilient than the fort. I just hope that they be careful, but I guess if they fall there'll be piles of snow to fall in.

Tina had picked me up and took me out to the front entrance to wait for the knights, but the moment the heavy doors were opened, the wind howled violently, causing Tina to shrink her neck due to the cold. She was even wearing lays of warm clothing

and hugging me tightly, tho I didn't think snow spirits would make very great body warmers. In the end, the knights who went to town came back somewhere around noon.

"Welcome back! How was the town?"

"The old hut collapsed and there wasn't as much damage as I expected. The town folk really are accustomed to the snow more than us. Food reserves will last and there's plenty of firewood. We'll be okay if the snow continues for a little while."

With that, the worry in Tina had gone, she was even joking with the others. She loosened her grip enough that I was able to jump out onto the ground. From the entry hall, I ran towards the outside world... Even though I went forward, the wind was so strong I was pushed backward.

"No! Don't go outside Mil, the snow is really nasty out there!"

I looked back at Tina who was shouting for me to come back, and when I did, the one-eyed knight had also arrived along with others on horses. They were many tools strapped to the horses, all of which were used to deal with the snow. Some of them even had pulled sleds to move piles of snow.

I really wanted to try those sleds out...

"Have you been a good girl ?"

Of course!

I spun around in a circle quickly while barking in the hall. After a few moments, I calmed down and everyone around me was laughing merrily. The tension in the air seemed to have lifted a little. I thought, since I couldn't help with the snow removal, the least I can do is make them happy and laugh.

But this storm truly was terrible. The wind didn't cut things but was like a lead weight smashing into everything. People, buildings and trees were equally destroyed in its path. Even the snowfall was unforgiving. Not even five minutes and the snow piled so high that my body couldn't be seen, swallowing me whole. I had to constantly shake the snow off.

"You take a break, call back teams five and eight instead!"

The chief, who looked concerned about the knight with a tightening expression.

"Right now? Have you guys had your breaks yet?"

"We have to hurry, the sun will be going down soon so we have to hurry up."

The chief gave his order and the knight acknowledged it before rushing back to the fortress. I came all the way out here for the one-eyed knight but was he going to leave? I loitered around his feet and pulled on his boot strings towards the fort trying to get him to go back in, but he only smiled and gently patted me.

Then about eight knights wearing thick snow gear along with horses carrying snow tools arrived. It seems that things were moving quickly since the one-eyed knight and the Chief arrived.

"Are we going to the next town to remove snow?"

Among them was Knight and they all spoke with the Chief with ease and I wondered if they could become his friend.

"No, we'll finish up here and make our way to the foot of the mountain where the snow spirit lives."

Hearing the word spirit, my ears perked up and I listened attentively.

"Are you sure?! That sounds like suicide to me! The road there is buried in snow!"

"If it's buried, you just have to dig it out."

"Seriously...?"

Knix then chimed in with a question.

"What are you going to do up there?"

"Give offerings to the snow spirit so she may stop the storm."

That being said, the chief looked back at his horse, attached to it was several bottles. It smelled of strong alcohol, the type that if you stood next to it, it would be possible to get drunk. The chief turned his eyes back.

"The old folk in town say that the spirit is angry and this storm is its wrath and that we must ask it's forgiveness. They also said that even if we ask for forgiveness with offerings, the storm may not even stop immediately."

"So we have to find the altar?"

"Tes, we had to stop them by promising to take their offerings for them. It'd definitely be suicide if they went. I can't just let them go,"

"Chief... Do you really think the spirit is the cause...?"

Knix chimed in again, rather I would like if he didn't try frightening everyone, but it seemed the Knights didn't notice. As the talk went on more and more snow started to accumulate on my body.

"I'm skeptical on the cause, but I don't think they're baseless either. The weather certainly is abnormal."

The chief replied in a low voice as he looks up. The window and snow continued to batter everything without a moment's rest.

"If this storm is due to the spirit... Then as long as her anger cannot be calm, it's possible this storm may last forever. The surrounding Knights looked at the chief with gloom on their faces. I began to wonder what would happen if the storm continued on like this. At the moment, the current situation was good. We had the breathing room that we could joke and laugh, but for others... Their supplies are low and they wouldn't be able to get any more until the storm stopped.

After that, the monotonous labor called snow removal continued on for hours each day. The Knights' bodies were becoming exhausted with food and fuel getting lower each day. Morale had fallen and there wasn't a possibility to evacuate. Unable to move, it's possible that they'd have to wait until they freeze to death. Their faces are blue and the chief said something about that spring would surely come if we could endure. He was awfully quiet while he said that as he overlooked everyone.

"If we don't go, it might be too late. We need to take the offerings to the altar, even though the possibility is low, there's still a chance. We have to go while we have the strength."

"Certainly it's dangerous to go to the altar in this storm and the altar isn't far, those

who aren't comfortable with their strength can stay. We promised the town's people that we'd go."

For better or worst, the fortress held many people who would never utter the words "I am not confident, so I'll watch the fort".

"If the chief and Deputy are going, we go!"

"Oi, I have faith only in my strength!"

"That's right, what snow storm!?"

Even though they were blue-faced a while ago, their spirits rose with their cries. Their heated hearts melted the snow, but all within the palm of the Chief. Both the chief and deputy laughed, but one knight spoke up with impatience.

"Oi! let's hurry, I want to get back before sunset!"

With that everyone began to get up and gather their equipment. The one-eyed knight stroked my head one last time before getting up, and I could only bark

"Oo!"

"Oi, noisy. You're staying to watch the fort!"

I'm apologizing because I'm almost positive she's mad because I snuck out. I was suppose to be watching our home, but I left while Mother was gone for a month."Where have you been Millefria!?" I can see it now, while I was here with the knights playing, she out there really angry. I could feel her anger in every snowflake and I could almost hear her wails in each wind. The townsfolk were certainly right that it was something to do with the spirits and unless I soothe Mother's anger, this will probably last for a long time... Maybe even an eternal snowstorm.

If the one-eyed knight is going to see Mother, I certainly have to go as well. Because I'm the cause of the storm, so I desperately scratched at the one-eyed knight's boot with my forearms. I tried to tell him" Take me too!"

"Do you really not want to watch the fort for us?"

The edge of the one-eyed knight's lips went up slightly into a grin, he picked me up

and hugged me like Tina does with one hand holding my forepaw and the other arm wrapped around my belly.

“I’m sorry I take you, it’s too hard to watch you out in this storm. “

It was the Ice Chief that spoke up with a cold tone while watching.

I noticed that his eyes were warning me, that I would be burdensome to take with them up the mountain in this storm and not to follow.

“I’m sorry... But it’s dangerous...”

” Of course, Tina. Please come get Mil.”

Even though the Chief became a little weak when I looked him in the eye, the one-eyed knight remained steadfast. Tina quickly came over and took me from the one-eyed knight’s embrace

No! No, no!

I’m supposed to go too!

I was the cause of this storm and that meant I had to go with the knights to calm mother! I had to apologize to Mother for leaving without her knowing and get her forgiveness! I ended up resting with all my might, my short limbs flaring about. But it was useless, the one-eyed knight’s grip was ironclad against my weak struggles. I could only scratch at the air with despair.

“I’ll be back soon and we’ll play in the room.”

The one-eyed knight said some words of comfort, but I didn’t want to play!

“Mill, why don’t you come and cook with me?”

My will was ignored by them and the one-eyed knight handed me over to Tina. She held onto me tightly so I couldn’t follow after the knights as they walked out the fort’s doors.

“Let’s go!” The Chief gave the command and all the knights mounted their horses, leaving into the storm. As their backs slowly faded into the white abyss, my barks were

filled with refusal.

Chapter 20

Snow Spirit

As they walked through the forest at the base of the mountain, the storm grew stronger and stronger the closer they got towards the location of the altar. The wind also brought with it a white-out, leaving them only able to see a few feet ahead. If not for sticking close while on horseback, they would have lost sight of each other. The Knights could only hear the frenzied screams of the wind and their bodies growing cold due to the sheer amount of snow that plastered their coats. Even with them covered head to toe in fur, they could feel the piercing cold.

Their only blessing was that this forest had trees that grew densely together, weathering the full brunt of the storm's fury. However, it was a double-sided sword. The trees were packed with snow, here and there branches would snap; the snow that was held up on it would come crashing down with such force, it could only be compared to dropping a large chunk of iron down. This had more than enough force to take one of the knights' lives. This meant they had to proceed with even more caution, taxing their strained senses even more.



Grayle wondered how much farther until they reached the altar. He had visited it many times when he patrolled, but the white-out warped his sense of distance. The thought to "turn back" while the horses still had the strength to do so started to nag at his mind. He felt it was dangerous to keep proceeding at this pace. He felt that the scenery was different than he remembered, but with such limited visibility, it was hard to confirm or deny. It was almost certain that they may have taken the wrong way...

Gayle, who was at the front of the pack, looked back and could see Knix just behind him while also barely making out the Chief who was behind Knix. He was about to try and speak with the Chief, but almost in an instant, the storm died down unnaturally. Almost all the knights were thrown off balance, as the wind that pushed against them disappeared; Causing them to almost fall off their horses.

"What happened?!"

"Why did the wind stop?"

"Keep your guards up!"

"We're already here!"

Calm before the storm. This was the ominous thought that popped into Gayle's head as the wind died down with a few of the knights shouting in surprise, but Knix's comment brought his attention ahead of them. Before them, the forest opened up into a clearing with a lone altar sitting alone in the middle. Knix and I dismounted our horses before slowly approaching the altar step by step.

The altar of the Snow Spirit, with just three large pillars, as white as the snow. Ever since the first time he had came to this place, it had been like this. Each pillar reached into the sky with such grandeur, even the snow couldn't cover them.

"Was the snowstorm really caused by the spirit...?"

Cromwell murmured as he too disembarked his horse. With the storm stopping the moment they reached the altar grounds, it was almost certain that it was the spirit's power. It was an ominous feeling that welcomed them, their surroundings deathly quiet and the tension gripped all their heart.

"Knix! Come back, don't go forward by yourself!"

Knix, whose curiosity got the better of him, he tried to go towards the altar on his own, was called back by Gayle. He was cautious of the altar, his nervousness was heard as he gulped. Only other sound that could be the soft fall of snowflakes as they touched the ground.

" Will the spirit... Really appear?"

With the question being asked, Gayle was a little skeptical, never once had he met the Snow Spirit but among the villagers, there are only a few who have seen the spirit.

It's said that the spirit of these mountains had protected this area from people who wished to do harm. Never has there been a conflict here even though it's right on the border between two nations. There was no way one could send an army through this terrain and even if they tried, the storms would batter them. It would just waste all their energy and resources trying to protect itself from the elements, not leaving room

to wage a war.

"Have you ever seen the snow spirit...?"

Cromwell asked Gayle as he gazed at the altar.

"No."

Gayle only shook his head towards his question.

"There's a rumor that the snow spirit of this mountain cares a lot about this country and all though it's frustrating to do, she would on occasions, give help to the royal family. I myself haven't seen her in person, but people say that she's an outrageous beauty, but this is when I was visiting the prince.

Gayle, this time, nodded with a thoughtful expression, thinking upon Cromwell's words.

"Eh? Chief, You haven't seen the Snow spirit who is suppose to be that beautiful?

Before Cromwell could answer Knix, who interrupted him, the snow started to stir. As if it was inhaling from the forest, then exhaling towards the altar where the snow on the ground began to rise like a vortex towards the sky and then... the snow fell towards the ground lifelessly and in the center where the vortex had once been, stood a beautiful woman.

Knix and the other knights let out awes of amazement, but Gayle only looked on at the beautiful. He seemed to take the sight of her in. The woman wore clothes that weren't normally worn in this country and most definitely different from that of nobles.

Pure white with a slightly glossy shine to them with the bust area open, but covering modestly her large chest area with a belt just underneath to keep it together. These clothes she wore made her seem almost godly, however, Grayle was focused on the fur lining around her neck. It was like Mil, pure, fluffy and white. Moving his gaze a little higher, he saw a very feminine face that was small, but not unnatural looking in proportion with her body. Her demeanor was like she was something sculpted out of ice by the finest artisans.

Cromwell had seen the beautiful women in town, although they were annoying to him, he couldn't help compare them to this woman that appeared out of the snow. This kind

of beauty was in a different league. Comparing the girls in town to her seem almost an insult to her beauty, as if there needed a comparison. Their faces would ways be a little red at the nose when you passed them or when they saw someone they liked, their faces would turn a little red, but her...

Her face was white as the skin, but not sickly looking, almost too perfect. It didn't even look like an ounce of red blood flowed under her skin. Her hair was a glossy whitish-silver color. with each strand of her hair simmered beautifully when it caught the light. Her eyes were a light blue, almost as if they were chiseled from the purest ice.

But that face was stained with rage, but even then, they couldn't look away. Her beauty was a deadly weapon. She was obviously not human with the way she appeared, but that only meant one thing...

she was the Snow Spirit; Snowlea [*1]

Although Grayle was stunned for a moment, he noticed he forgot to breathe, but looking back, even the others did too from the sudden appearance of such a beautiful woman.

“Hey, breathe guys...”

Though, even with this heads up, everyone still was as unmoving as stone as if their souls were being sucked out.

“Look at her fur collar, do not look at her face!”

With his command, their gazes with much willpower slowly moved towards her neckline and suddenly they all took deep breaths, relief washing over all of them. Grayle looked at the fur neckline, keeping his thoughts on Mil and how she was waiting for them at the fort, trying to calm his heart.

“Are you... Snowlea, the snow spirit?”

Cromwell who was the calmest of all the nights asked her, tension could be heard in his voice.

“...My daughter...”

Snowlea muttered those words, but it was as clear as the sun on a clear day to them,

It overpowered everything around them, trembling in their eardrums. Then suddenly, her hands reached out towards Chief Cromwell and before anyone could react, her hands gripped his throat. Her face twisted into an angry snarl.

“My child! What did you do to Milfria!? Where did you take my beloved child!?”

Her eyes wide with trembling rage, but Cromwell was mesmerized by her moving lips, with each move, her sharp fangs could be seen sometimes. The moment her frenzied screams came out, the pressure around all of them began to weigh down on them, making it hard for the knights to breathe, even one tried to step back but fell over. The horses even were startled, trying to flee. Grayle came out of shock and tried piecing together what Snowlea said to try and figure out what was happening. From what little was said, it seemed to him that she was searching for her missing child, He never knew she had one and apparently, neither did Cromwell

“Why did you people come here!? Did you son of a bitches take my Milfria!? What is your purpose!?”

A raged failed wail came from Snowlea who just moments ago, was like a goddess, was now similar to a beast. her teeth bared in a twisted snarl, just waiting to tear out Cromwell’s throat. Out of instinct, Gayle immediately put his hand on the hilt of his sword at his waist but didn’t draw it.

“Please wait, give us a chance to explain ourselves Ms. Snow Spirit! We have only come up the mountain to ask that you stop the blizzard! We are the knights from the fort below tasked with watching over this region! We did not take your child, in fact, we never even knew you had a child!”

“...The Knight’s from the fort...?”

It seemed the words Grayle threw said go through to her as her face seemed to slowly untwist as she calmed herself down, she looked over all the Knights present before decided to believe in Grayle’s statement, releasing Cromwell from her grasp

“It’s obvious you wouldn’t know that a spirit had a child since we fear that if people knew, they would try and take out children. If one were to raise a spirit, they would have access to such mighty powers...”

Snowlea began to talk to herself, but the more she spoke, the more her face began to twist in anger again. If a child of the snow spirit was really taken, this is a disaster in

the making! What purpose would someone have in kidnapping her child? The only thoughts he could come up with is to overthrow the royal family or destroy this country. It was also possible that it was for a different reason. Regardless of why, what was important at the moment was that it happened, leaving them having to notify the kingdom immediately, but before anything was done, Grayle calmed his mind before anything. He thought some more and he needed to ask a question that came up.

“But during the storm, it’s been difficult for anyone to reach anywhere, not to mention going up the mountain. I know this may anger you, but... Is it possible your child wandered off from your home?”

Snowlea glared at Grayle after he asked her that question, it was full of anger. He didn’t want to enrage her, but as a rule, he had to ask. It was a possibility that’s why, because people wouldn’t be able to climb the mountain this winter, and even if they tried, they wouldn’t be sane people or alive. Snowlea’s eyes narrowed as she looked at him, but she understood the underlying tones

“Indeed, with the human’s fragile bodies, it would be difficult to climb to the summit where I live, but it isn’t impossible. Over the past several hundred years, there have been many people who climbed my mountain with the vile intent to try and conquer me. Many lost their lives, while others gave up halfway. Those who thought they could endear till the end, I took their lives.”

Snowlea’s words break the tension, but it only made their blood colder than it already was. Although she spoke of people who tried to reach her home with evil intentions, she still spoke of taking lives as if she was talking about the weather. It was a reminder to them that even though she was the most generous and passionate of them, she was still fundamentally different from humans. They all have killed others at one point or another in this line of work, regret was not a feeling they would have, but she was completely indifferent to taking a life.

“So then... It wouldn’t be possible still for a human to steal your child...”

Snowlea had a desperate expression while she chewed anxiously on her lip. It looked like she was almost about to cry...

“O my beloved child is just a baby! How can she go down the mountain with such small lovely paws! Milfria is a cowardly child, I don’t believe she’ll leave the safety of our home on her own! She must be trembling with fear somewhere unknown to her, o my

poor child!"

Tears began to flow down both her cheeks, each tear held such beauty that they would not lose to any gem. It was a sorrow of a mother that lost their child and Grayle wanted to desperately help her.

"We will help you look for your child, whatever it takes! So please, stop the snow storm... In this weather, we won't be able to see little alone search."

The snow calmed down, for a moment they were even able to see out in the distance, but just as quickly it died down, it rose back up with even more ferocity. Grayle looked at Snowlea with a confused looked.

"I... Can't... I can't control my powers right now. When I think of someone possibly having kidnapped my child... My anger will not dissipate, I never intended to harm the villagers below..."

Suddenly, a strong gust of wind erupted around the altar as if responding to Snowlea anger. All of the Knights took a step back while covering their eyes. Grayle sensed that the crisis at hand was going to become much worst. How long would it take to find her child? What did her child even look like? Was the snow storm ever going to stop if they didn't find the Spirit's child? In the worst case... What if her child was dead? In that case, would the storm continue forever?

With all these questions running back to back in his head, it was a headache that she couldn't at the least, calm the storm. They also had to send a messenger to the Capital to inform them of the crisis at hand and request the Kingdom's army come to help them in searching for her child. On the other hand, they would have to request the aid of the other spirits to help restrain this snow spirit as humans stood no chance against her. Grayle wasn't familiar with spirits, but he did know that the Fire Spirit resided to the south and was on relatively friendly terms with humans. Maybe he could assist with melting the snow? Grayle hoped that Cromwell would also have some plans going on in his head to help ease the situation, but his expression as just as dire as his.

"Chief, what do you want to do? It doesn't look like the storm can be stopped anymore, it's too dangerous to stay here as it is now."

Knix shouted from behind them impatiently, but it didn't help the situation at all by telling them something that they were already aware of. Snowlea was crying out her

child's name hysterically while crying, her hands covering her face. Grayle decided that it'd probably be best that they search while making their way back to the fort, but before that, he stepped towards Snowlea. The closer he got, the stronger the wind got. Even someone as heavy as Grayle could be blown away if he got too close.

"Grayle!"

Cromwell cried out trying to stop him, but his feet kept moving desperately until he was in front of Snowlea before trying to soothe her back to sanity.

"Listen to me Snowlea! Tell me what your child looks like, we can't find someone who we don't know what they look like! Are they a boy or a girl? Do they have the same hair as you? What clothes were they wearing, are they still a nursing child?"

Gayle words didn't continue because Snowlea who was crying had suddenly become silent. Snowlea, who had been crying slowly looked up at Grayle, her eyes glancing from between her fingers. Her eyes had a deathly frost in them making Grayle's heart stop for a moment from freight.

"Why...?"

Her cold white hands stretched out and her thin fingers touched Grayle's cheek, a sense of slowly being frozen down to the core overcame him. It had only been for a moment, but the part where her finger had touch had been deprived of heat already. Grayle's mind had warning bells going off, but his body wouldn't move from its spot.

"Why do you smell like my beloved child...?"

The beautiful snow spirit rose up, her murmuring voice slipped from a face that looked blankly at him before her eyes narrowed with rage and turned into a snarl, her fangs bared openly at him with intense rage.

"What have you done to my child?!"

With all the willpower in him, Grayle reached for his sword and tried to pull it out, his mind screaming to him that if he did not fight back, he would die today. Most humans would not be able to do anything in the face of an angered spirit, but wait for their pending death. Grayle was different though, with all his might, he put his strength into the sword...

But then...

“Milfria...?”

All that rage and all that killing intent disappeared as if it was just a lone gust of wind, Snowlea’s eyes were focused on something by Grayle’s feet, only that name escaped her lips.

Chapter 21

Parting

I feel like something bad was going to happen soon, leaving my heart unsettled. Cromwell and the one-eyed Knight took the others up the mountain, leaving me in the fort with Tina. She was trying to read a book, but it seemed her heart was restless as well.

“Mill, don’t you worry, even though the blizzard outside is still going on, the chief and Deputy Chief don’t make mistakes. If they sense its too dangerous, they’ll come back.”

Tina saw me wondering around restless and picked me up then put me on her lap. Were the One-eyed Knights really going to be okay? I worried about a lot of things, but I wondered when they reach Mother’s altar and see her, what would happen. The most likely scenario is that Mother was extremely angry with me. I jumped off Tina’s lap with an “oof” because I couldn’t stay still at all due to the turmoil in my heart

“Come to me...”

I heard Mother’s voice, but it was a faint whisper. For a moment I thought Mother had found me and had come, but I didn’t see her anywhere. Soon only the sound of the howling wind from the storm outside could be heard.

“It’s okay mill...”

Tina called out to me with a gentle tone, but it didn’t work. I felt it in my heart that I had to go see the One-eyed Knight. I kept whining as I paced the common room while Tina looked at me with pity like I was a child whose parents dropped me off and left.

“I know you love the Grayle a lot, but if you’re so worried we can go to the entrance and let you look out from the door for a moment, how about that?”

“Kyan!”

Yes! take me outside now!

I stood on my hind legs while reaching my forepaws up, inviting her to pick me up excitedly

“Yaa~! What a cute pose!”

I was understood! Since you understand how cute I am, hold me! Tina is weak against me and thus tries to always hold me!

Sadly, the one-eyed Knight won't hold me since he plans on “returning me to the wild”. Like a strict policy “Train your feet” and making me walk everywhere. Even though Tina knows she shouldn't be pampering me, she's weak against my cuteness and caves every time.

“You shouldn't go out there...”

When I thought that I was going outside with Tina who was finally enticed into carrying me, Brother Gatekeeper had come inside the front hall door as we came into the corridor. He had a good amount of snow piled on his shoulders and head. Even in such a blizzard, you guarded the front gate?

“The storm is getting even worse.”

“What!? It's been really bad, how can it get even worst!?”

Tina raised her voice at what Brother Gatekeeper said.

“It's gotten to the point that you could freeze almost immediately out there.”

As he said that, Brother took off his cloak, but the cloak didn't conform to cloth physics when it fell on the ground. It kept a rough shape of Brother's back. The cloak had frozen over, surely if your clothes were wet you'd turn into an ice sculpture in a heartbeat. While Brother was showing Tina and me how bad it was, the other Knights who stayed behind to remove snow came in. One by one, they petted me while they passed us then gathered around the fireplace to warm their freezing bodies.

As of recent, they've gotten in the habit of petting me if I look up at them.

“Do you think they'll be fine out there?”

“It's going to be tricky...”

"If the enemy was human, they'd have no problem, but how are they going to compete with a Spirit?"

"We should wait a little bit before we decide to do anything, they loaded equipment and rations to climb the mountain."

Everyone kept discussing what they should do about the situation, but all it went in one ear and out the other. I wondered if I should wait here. A imagine of the One-Eyed Knight came into my head of him slowly becoming too tired and falling down into the snow and him dying. This thought sent a deathly chill up my spine.

I was almost immune to the cold and snow, but the One-eyed knight wasn't. Maybe in the past, I was human, but now I'm a spirit with the power to protect everyone, especially the One-eyed knight! These thoughts flooded my heart and then...

"Mil!!"

I heard Tina's surprised voice.

"What's going on!?"

"It's snowing inside!"

Everyone was looking at me with surprise, around my body a small snowstorm began to wrap around me. I was also surprised by this, but Tina who was holding me held onto me desperately. I could feel the fear coming off her, but for my safety. Unfortunately for her, my body turned into snow and disappeared into the wind. In my mind I was surprised! I could disappear!

"Mil!!"

Tina cried out and the other Knights came running towards me and tried to grab me. That was the last I saw and I no longer felt anything as my body changed into snowflakes before it melted in the warm air of the common room

I died?!

I don't understand what happened, but so suddenly? Is this how spirits die?

All I did was wish with all my heart that I could help the One-eyed knight, then I felt

like my body was weightless and before I knew it, my body had turned into snow. All these thoughts raced through me, but I then felt like I became whole again... Even though I was scared, I opened my eyes. For a split second, I thought I truly died and went to heaven, but with the serve weather, I was able to deduce I was just outside in the storm.

I thought it for a moment, then it clicked I just moved outside. I'm not dead yet!!

Thinking back, mother also left for the kingdom like this. It also happened to me when I thought of the One-eyed knight, so I thought of the One-eyed Knight again like before and I felt the same sensation again. I think I did it!

I really did it!

Sadly, the scene before me poured water over my excitement. In front of me was the One-eyed knight and beside him was mother... They were about to start fighting!

Oh! I need to stop them!

Before I could even utter a cry, mother had stopped midway, she was looking directly at me. Her eyes were wide with surprise, but the tears were spilling out of them. I felt my chest constrict painfully at the sight of my Mother crying.

“...Milstria...?”

The One-eyed knight had frozen mid-action too with his sword half drawn. He too was looking at me with surprise.

“Why are you here...?”

“Mill!?”

Knix yelled out in surprise along with the other knights behind him. I let out a sigh of relief that everyone was alive. I made it in time, I didn't want to imagine what would have happened if I hadn't made it in time... I checked one more time and confirmed all the knights who left were here unharmed.

“Milstria!”

My mother was now kneeling down with her arms open towards me, her voice a

mixture of pain and relief. I quickly ran into her embrace and started to lick the tears running down her two beautiful cheeks, leaving my tongue a little numb.

“You had me so worried! I was scared I lost you!”

I had to apologize to my mother who I worried so much with my little escape.

“What’s going on...?”

“Wait... Mill is Snowlea’s child?”

The Knights were obviously confused, who would have thought that a little fox cub was actually a snow spirit? Unfortunately, I couldn’t speak their language so I couldn’t explain, but this was put to the back of my mind as I was embraced lovely by Mother. It felt so warm and comfortable to be back in her arms.

“So you ran away by your self Mil. It’s good that you returned back to your mother...”

Mother was stroking my head with a beautiful smile filled with a tender smile, but her face suddenly twisted when the One-eyed knight spoke towards me. Her eyes locked onto him and her face twisted with anger, her voice filled with killing intent.

“And again, how dare you scoff at my child that you kidnaped, I knew I shouldn’t have trusted you! “

What!? Kidnaped!? him?! The words that my mother almost screamed caught me off guard. I don’t know how Mother misunderstood what happened, but I left our home without permission by myself to try and find Mother... Was this why the blizzard was going on?!

“Wait, Mill -“

“Shut up, Don’t try and make excuses you!”

“Kyann!”

Mother was misunderstanding the situation, he wasn’t the bad man! I tried to explain to Mother in a rush, but I couldn’t form the words with my mouth. Only ‘Kyan’ came out. Mother was in a frenzy now and didn’t respond to my barks.

“I will not let you or your knights leave here alive for this!”

Mother then let out a chilling declaration towards all the knights, her voice was monotonous and cold, almost ice like. I could see the magic in mother becoming more dense, swirling around inside her. If it was released, none of the knights would survive it, maybe even the fort and the villagers would be spared either. It felt that much from what I saw.

Mother was about to rob me of my beloved One-eyed Knight...

I couldn't let such a horrid thing happen. I couldn't speak, but that didn't matter. I kept barking or making other sounds, whatever I could to stop Mother from killing him, but suddenly as if responding to my heart; it wasn't a bark that left my mouth...

“- Stop it!”

A high-pitched and lovely voice, like a toddler, came out. It seemed like time itself stopped at that moment, Mother was stunned for a moment and she stopped gathering power.

“...Mילפְרִיא...?”

“...Is that your voice...?”

Mother's mouth was agape and she let out a surprised voice while the One-eyed Knight made a stupid surprised face as well. Even I surprised myself, I even looked around me for a child, but there wasn't one. I took a moment to compose myself and grasped onto that feeling before I could forget it.

“I... Words... Talk...”

Each word felt alien to me, each one took a lot of effort. It's been a year since I was born, but I could still remember words well, but I was able to absorb even more words at the fort. I could finally speak, But pronunciation is difficult! The words were hard to form with my small tongue and maybe the fact a fox's vocal cords weren't meant to form such complex sounds, the mouth structure wasn't in my favor as well.

“I-“

“Shh, enough for now...”

Mother interrupted me as she kneeled back down and look at me with impatience.

" You don't have to say anything more. I'm happy you can speak now haha!"

"Yeah... haha..."

"Well, Milfria!

Mother was about to keep talking with a happy tone, but I needed to clear up the misunderstanding.

"Mother... It's different... than you think... I-I was not scolded... It's true..."

"...What...?"

Poor Mother, her eyebrow raised slightly with interest. I kept talking, but it was tiring using my voice to speak. Even so, I had to clear this one so the One-eyed knight doesn't get punished for something he didn't do

"The reason I wasn't there... Was I was lonely so I left to find you... But I ended up at the fort with the One-eyed knight..."

Every one of the Knights were good people.

"...Everyone at the fort... Good people... Even the village. I sorry I left the mountain..."

I bowed my head, bracing myself for Mother's anger. I was sure she would be shout at me, Mother-

"That's amazing, Milfria!!"

-Mother is happy... She stroked my head while impressed.

"I thought of you as a baby, but you still made it down the mountain by yourself on foot. I didn't know you had such bravery! You can even speak and use a movement skill! Mother is very happy!"

The One-eyed knight was staring at us, his mouth wide open.

"Even though you've been growing wonderfully, but you don't have to rush to grow up

my child. Let me enjoy my time with you, my cute Milfria..."

When you think of spirits, you'd think of something cool, but not what mother was showing right now. She was Mother though, she was relieved and expressed her happiness towards me after finding me safe. It was cute though.

"Well, you'll forgive me, won't you?"

" Of course."

"You won't hurt the others?"

Mother, finally remembering there were other people here that she almost killed after being reminded, turned and stood up, facing the Knights.

"I'm sorry to you all, I almost did an unforgivable act. I hope you could understand the situation of losing your child, I hope you could forgive me."

Mother apologized towards the One-eyed knight with a sorry expression. Her expression seemed to disperse the tension that hung in the air before, was this the power of a beautiful woman?

The One-eyed knight's expression went back to its usual stoic ways, but everyone else was surprised still.

"No, It's alright is the misunderstanding has been fixed."

Sensing the situation cleared up, he pressed the sword back into the sheath and visibly loosened up. He accepted her apology, but his sight was on me. I wanted to say something, but when I spoke, it was strange to keep calling him the one-eyed knight. It caught in my mouth, but Mother spoke up before I could figure out what I wanted to say.

"Even if you say that should you ever need help you should come to the altar, I'll lend you my power, but for now I will need to give my apologies to the village people below for the blizzard. Since it turned out this way, unless the current snow clears up, I won't let the snow fall this winter."

With Mother saying that the clouds dispersed at a visible pace and the sun already began to shine through.

"Also thank you. You've protected my child while I was away. I can tell that you all took great care of her. What should we do for your reward... Maybe a kiss from me?"

Mother was smiling while saying such a joke...

However, the expressions of the One-eyed Knight and the other men had expectant expressions. Is this not a tsundere!? You all were about to get killed just a few seconds ago, but you forgive mother because she's beautiful?! Well, on the bright side, it's good that no one was angry with Mother...

Well... I don't know about me. I was the cause of all this trouble and I would be sad if they hated me because of it

"Well, let us go home Milfria."

"Wait... Wait!"

"You're still you and developing, you have to spend time with mother so you can't go back with them today."

"Wait... Ha!"

The winds began to wrap around Mother and me as she picked me up. Mother was going to move to our home in the mountain, but I still haven't apologized to the One-eyed knight yet nor have I expressed my gratitude to them for taking care of me! I wasn't even ready to part with them yet!

"Mill!"

The One-eyed Knight extended his hand towards us, but before he could reach us, we began to fade into the snow. Even so, I managed to say my goodbye before my head disappeared.

"I'm so sorry and thank you! It was fun! everyone, I love you all!"

And before they disappeared, the One-eyed knight was the last thing I saw. no, I guess I disappeared before them...

Chapter 22

At The Northern Fort

The blizzard that had been battering them for the past few days without rest had finally ended. The skies had slowly cleared with the warm sun peeking through the clouds, even the temperature had already begun to raise and the hard packed snow began to soften. With Mil's appearance, Snowlea's wrath had ended bringing peace back to the region. Grayle even promised a favor from the snow spirit, such a thing was almost a miracle to have a spirit as a friend.

But none of this brightened any of the darkness in the Knights' hearts. Grayle and Cromwell as well had grim expressions. Mill, the white baby fox that had appeared two weeks ago in the fort was the child of Snowlea. She was an irreplaceable existence to them, someone who brought joy to their cold live, though she was now back up on the mountain with her mother, it was still sad for them who've grown used to her presence. That lovely white ball of fur will never be clinging to their feet, or eating jerky from their hand nor will they see her running around in the training yard snow excitedly again.

After today, when Grayle returns back to the room, He'll be alone again. He began to think of all the things he would have to clean up that was for Mill, these thoughts only made me more depressed. He sighed and reprimanded himself for being depressed about it.

"Wait! So she's not coming back!?"

Tina cried out hysterically after everyone had made it back safely to the fort, Grayle and Cromwell had to explain what happened at the mountain. The other knights were also suffering from the blow.

"Ah... My healing..."

"I guess I won't be able to pet that fur anymore, huh?"

In a matter of two weeks, Mill had become that big of a pillar of support to everyone.

"don't get so down, it's not like she's never going to come back. Maybe she'll visit again if you like."

Grayle tried to comfort the knights.

"When is that more specifically?

"Well, Spirits have long lives. Their sense of time is possibly different from ours..."

"So probably in the next ten years?"

"It's also possible that she'd forget about us since she's back with her mom..."

The atmosphere that had slowly been brightening up suddenly darkened again. Tension overtook the room again. It seemed that all these Knights, who looked like thugs, were absent-minded. All because of one little baby fox-spirit. Even Cromwell, who had been stubbornly hiding his love for animals till now, had spiritless eyes. He ended up returning to his room immediately when they arrived.

"M-Mil..."

Tina Had tears in her eyes. Even though no one had died, the air in the common room was worst than a funeral. Even Knix looked like someone had stolen something precious from him. Tonight, everyone would take their feelings to bed, but hopefully, everyone would be able to train and work. They still were knights. Therefore, Grayle had to organize his feelings today as well.

Though it was impossible to erase the loss of Mill from his heart, he couldn't show a miserable face to his subordinates. In the end, Grayle ended up leaving the lounge silently...

Σ

The next day, the fortress was still as listless as yesterday. Although the sun was bright and lit up the fort. The faces of the knights were still dark. Cromwell knew, but he too was also depressed. The breakfast was tasteless. Grayle couldn't suppress his feeling and saw the bright sun, shining brightly as if this day was like the ones before. He resented it. He resented that it could shine, even though Mill wasn't there to watch his training. He resented that he was lonely at breakfast. With these feelings, he couldn't tell his men any different.

Grayle saw the seen later of Cromwell desperately hugging his beloved horse. It only pained him because Mill wasn't there, playing with them as usual. Then in his office, Grayle was in his office, dealing with paperwork. He had to send a letter to the Kingdom, reporting what happened but tried to leave out what he could due to Snowlea not wanting to make much public. Mill's existence still had to be reported though...

He asked Cromwell to write a letter to the king... But he was probably still crying in the stable still...

Grayle sighed lightly while standing up.

"Kyan!"

He quickly moved his foot and looked down. It was Mill's snow white fluffy tail that he stepped on. Though most of the tail was made up of fur, there still was the tailbone. He pushed the chair away, making sure not to step on Mill again. He squatted down in a hurry and gently checked her tail.

"I'm sorry Mill, I didn't mean to step on you!"

Mill's eyes were a bit watery.

"Are you okay...?"

Grayle felt bad about it as Mill came closer to him with large round eyes and said in a murky tone

"Yes, you big goof..."

"Okay... I'm glad... Mill can speak..."

While caught up in the moment, it finally clicked in his head. His eyes looked over her body before he stretched his hand out and touched the hair on her head. There was a physical body. His mouth was open in surprise as he confirmed she was real.

"...Why... Are you here...?"

It was an amazing feeling he had, but he came out sounding angry. The pretty fox-child who stole the hearts of every Knight in the fortress, including him, should have been

up the mountain with her mother. For the time being... Or eternity. He was ready for either. That was what happened yesterday, yet she was here right now.

"I came back... I'm sorry... Are you mad...?"

He was embarrassed by the sudden events that even the spot between his brows wrinkled unintentionally. Mill trembled a little as she was looking at him. Sighing, Grayle tried to make a soft expression as he stroked her head to reassure her.

"Never, I would never. I was just a little surprised. It's nice to see you again, but how did you get here?"

It worked as Mill's listless tail began to sway happily side to side.

I used a movement skill! It's the same one I used yesterday to get to you guys on the mountain!"

"Oh? That's amazing."

Because of the moment of complimenting her, Grayle stroked Mill's cheeks with both hands. It was soft and fluffy, like her tail. I kept stroking her fur while complimenting her. Though in the end, he ended up making a troubled expression.

"What happened with your mother? Did she forgive me and say you could come here?"

"You know, I'd like to go "Rogue" for a while, so I only play for a while, so I will come and play just for a bit every day now!"

After saying that, Mill's tail swayed at high-speed while laughing. Grayle had a feeling, probably similar to a feeling a divorced father's kid comes to visit?

"Well, if that's the case. You better let the others know that you've come to play. While you're at it, do something about the rotten air. Especially the Chief."

" Oh my god, what happened?"

Mill didn't understand what was happening.

"Well, go see it for yourself."

Grayle had a large grin on his face as he gently picked her up and headed out the office door. Mill looked up at him with confusion and uncertainty, also amazement at being carried by him.

“I changed the educational policy...”

Grayle said while laughing.

Mill wasn't a wild animal anymore, but a Spirit's child! An ordinary fox would have had to deal with the harsh reality of the outside and have to hunt its own prey. That's why he refused to pick her up on the premise that she'd have to return to the wild when she was old enough, but not anymore. He had long been suppressing the urge to hold her for a long time. He had even planned to try to teach her to hunt.

Now that though, he didn't have to be concerned if she became too dependant on them. Starting at that moment, they didn't need to do that anymore and just pamper her. Mill being a spirit was a relief to all of them, because they didn't have to give her up like they thought before. This was his honest feelings about it while carrying her on his shoulder with her facing backward, her swaying tail hitting his cheeks.

“Why are you laughing?”

Mill looked over her shoulder at Grayle willing saying that, as they walked into the hallway. In the hallway, a few Knights were there.

“Oh, Deputy Chief. Thanks for all-... what?”

“ Fuf~! Deputy Chief!! Mill! Why are you here?!”

The famous Northern Fortress in the snowy mountains and the Knights of the Kingdom. From now on, would also be joined by a small child fox-spirit who... Comes to play for “Just a bit” every day.

Author After notes:

This is complete with this.

It was nice to have finished before summer came...

I also want to finish with the fourth edition (Mill's father, spirit of fire, humanization of mill, etc.) and finish.

Thank you for reading so far.

I have not been able to reply, but I am happy to read comments. Thank you very much.

Then, in the extra edition.

MTL Ashes notes: With this, the first novel is complete <3~! I hope it healed your hearts as I won't be finishing up the rest of the novels, so I bid you all goodbye and thank you for walking with me on this journey of fluff~!



PtFF by: traktorA7EN